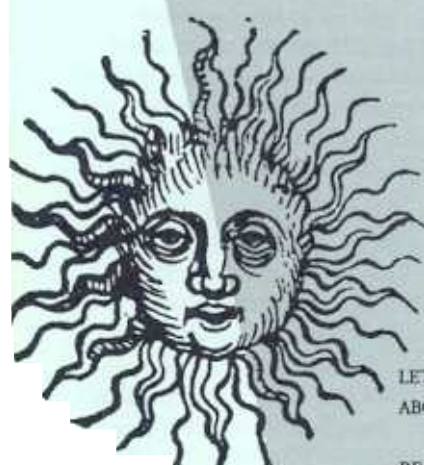
WRITING
THE
HEMISPHERE

# NEW AMERICAN WORLDS



LET'S TALK
ABOUT IT

READING AND
DISCUSSION
PROGRAMS IN
AMERICA'S
LIBRARIES

INTRODUCING

# NEW AMERICAN WORLDS

*One Hundred Years of Solitude,* by Gabriel García Márquez

*Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner

*Lonesome Dove,* by Larry McMurtry

*Invisible Man,* by Ralph Ellison

*The Handmaid's Tale,* by Margaret Atwood

Lost Atlantis. El Dorado. Hollywood. The New Beginning. Utopia. The Klondike. The Fountain of Youth. The Promised Land. Streets of Gold. In short, the New World.

**Among** countless factors that have shaped the nations and peoples of our hemisphere—and thus its literatures—have been those myths that lighted the horizons with hope for a better life, for social and economic improvement, for happiness, for a kind of Heaven on Earth. The reality of these sometime fictions is illustrated in the life of the man we commemorate in 1992: Christopher Columbus. An adventurer, a mystic, an entrepreneur, Columbus hoped to find the Earthly Paradise in one of the thousands of inlets along the shores of the New World. "We are in the zone of grace," he wrote. "We are at the edge of the world . . . at the point of the planet nearest Heaven." His quest, one of the truly legendary accomplishments of world history, ended in personal disillusion and defeat. The eventual downfall of this individual chosen by fate to represent the many explorers before and after him is not inappropriate when we consider the negative values that inevitably accompanied rosy dreams of a better world: black slaves labored to sustain the fabled world of the plantation; peons created the legendary wealth of *estancias* and *haciendas;* the mythic Wild West was won at the cost of the near-extinction of indigenous peoples. For every dream there was a nightmare; for every hope, disillusion. The social realities of the New World were not, in the end, unlike those of the Old. They were merely less petrified, more mutable.

We who are citizens of this New World now 500 years old (by European computation; by the Aztec calendar much older than that) are characterized more by diversity than similarity. We are divided linguistically into large units consisting principally of English- and Spanish-speaking peoples (with the notable exceptions of Portuguese and French and indigenous languages). Beyond this one, and not unimportant, indicator of partial cohesion, it is difficult to identify hemispheric bonds on the level of human relations: our religious, legal, governmental, and cultural codes are widely divergent. In the beginning, however, in 1492 (and even to a degree in 1992), we shared one significantly determining hemispheric similarity: an exuberant geography and the promise, challenge, and dangers of vast uninhabited spaces. The concept of the frontier, of both social and physical mobility, has indelibly shaped our world visions.

**When** accepting the Nobel prize for literature, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda spoke of the responsibilities of Latin American writers: "We are called upon to fill with words the confines of a mute continent, and we become drunk with the task of telling and naming." Neruda's words may be applied to the entire hemisphere. Beginning with Columbus, and the written record of his awestruck wonder, the New World is the product of intellectual curiosity and of hunger to explore the unknown. Ours is the hemisphere that was investigated, mapped, and populated during the era of the printed word. We have recorded (not always accurately by any means) the invention of our own reality through early chronicles and journals of exploration, through literary accounts of colonization and rebellion, of political autonomy and governmental instability, of industrialization and economic development, of hemispheric modernization—and of ripening and potential deterioration. Throughout the 500 years we have occasion to review in 1992, our peoples continued to push westward, north, and south, assimilating and decimating pre-Columbian peoples, following rivers and shores and natural trails, bound by mountains, and transcending them, absorbing rhythmic waves of new immigrants—first from the Atlantic to our east, later the Pacific to our west—until

discrete ethnic and ethic delineations often became blurred, and our populations, 500 years after the Encounter between the Old and New Worlds, comprise a fusion of most of the world's cultures. In many ways we replicate populations of the Old World, but we speak our mother tongues with a distinctly New World accent.

The writers of this new world brought with them their literary traditions and heritages. Our first writings were chronicles and records of heroic adventures. In Latin America, more "formal" letters began as a transplanted literature echoing the aesthetics of the Spanish Golden Age. In the Northern Hemisphere the earliest writings of "literary" merit tended to be more instructive and moralistic, reflecting the sterner, or at least less self-indulgent, culture of those lands. Gradually, national literatures developed, fashioned by continuing European influences and specifically American innovations. Our writers began to create their New American Worlds, planets peopled with Black Elk, the Deerslayer, Sam Slick, Martín Fierro, Huckleberry Finn, Anne of Green Gables, Annie Oakley, Pedro Páramo, Scarlett O'Hara, the Virginian, Dorothy and Toto, Babbitt, Colonel Buendía—*Americans.*

It is the special ability to create a mythic world—to chart the uncharted waters of the imagination much as Columbus charted the globe—that has determined the following list of writers. They all share the fundamentally American urge to fill a vast canvas with shapes, with colors, and, above all, with *meaning.* Like Neruda, they are drunk with telling and naming, and the worlds they create and name give life to the geographical vastness that so awed Columbus and the other early explorers. When we read these books, and live in these worlds, we experience the same shock of the new that drove generations of pioneers to stretch the frontier just a little bit farther into the unknown. Our five authors embody the ideals of a culture; they define an aspect of that culture, making it larger than reality and, at the same time, inseparable from reality. Their worlds are not illusion, but illumination. The featured novels explore Latin America in microcosm, the myths of the North American South and Wild West, and the more contemporary Failed Promise, as seen through the eyes of a woman and a black. America's writers have "written" our hemisphere. The literary frontiers they explore, whether it be Yoknapatawpha County or the world of the postwar urban black, become ties that bind us not only to Columbus, but also to the spirit of exploration itself. As we read of these New American Worlds, we ponder the 500 years following Columbus's "encounter" with America, and, looking back, we are able to look ahead.

## *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* by Gabriel García Márquez

Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, is one of Latin America's most prominent and consistently productive writers. His best-known novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* may be read in many ways and on many levels. Some critics have emphasized the Biblical overtones—the exodus, the search for a new settlement, the plagues, wars, famines, and vengeance (the dreaded pig's tail) visited upon the family. Others have pointed out that the novel may be read as a recapitulation of Latin American history: discovery, exploration, natural disasters, civil wars, economic exploitation, and cycles of prosperity and collapse. The reader may also read this novel without any reference to critics at all, following with pure fascination the sizzling fuse that leads not to *ex*plosion, but *im*plosion.

Throughout the exuberant activity of *One Hundred Years,* time spins in circles, repeating the family line of the Buendías, men and women irresistibly reliving the foibles and strengths of their ancestors. The matriarch Ursula shudders "with the evidence that time was not passing . . . but that it was turning in a circle." Mario Vargas Llosa, another distinguished Latin American author, has called *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a total [or totalizing] novel: "Above all because it puts into practice the Utopian design of every God-supplanter: to bring into being a complete reality, confronting actual reality with an image that is both its expression and its negation."

The world of the Buendías is one of the great fictional inventions of the century, and its humor, drama, energy, and humanity are fitting illustrations of the wondrous reality of New American Worlds.

Gabriel García Márquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* 1970. Avon.

## *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner

"Tell about the South," Mr. Compson enjoins his son Quentin. *"What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all."* The father and son narrators of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* are burdened with the challenge of revealing the gothic intricacies of the family- and tradition-bound world of Jefferson, Mississippi. Jefferson, like García Márquez's Macondo, is a self-contained world. It is but one community in Faulkner's famed Yoknapatawpha County, which contains within its 2,400 square miles the spectrum of timeless human dramas.

Faulkner and García Márquez share more than the honor of the Nobel Prize for Literature and the invention of New American Worlds. Their writings are characterized by similarities the younger, Latin writer attributes to the ambience created by contiguous bodies of water: the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Faulkner, it must also be pointed out, opened more than one

writer's eyes to the suppleness of time and narrative voice and shared with many his obsession with violence, decay, loss, and human endurance.

The Biblical allusion Faulkner offers in the title of his novel ("Now Absalom had commanded his servants, saying . . . and when I say unto you, Smite Amnon; then kill him, fear not") directs the reader to the theme of fratricide. In a broader context, family relations are used as a paradigm for all human entanglements. Faulkner abridges the rise and fall of empire through the curving line of four generations of Sutpens: upstart to monarch, vitality to dissolution. Hovering over the arena in which these dramas are played out is a brooding, miasmic fog of mystery that is lifted only as the last actors exit to clear the stage for the next tragedy. The neverending cycle of the rising and falling passions of Faulkner's South is glimpsed by Mr. Compson, as he unlocks the hidden story of the Sutpens that unfolds only in its telling: "We see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable."

William Faulkner. *Absalom, Absalom!* 1936. (Various paperback editions available.)

## *Lonesome Dove,* by Larry McMurtry

The world inhabited by Augustus McCrae and W. F. Call is as open and boundless as Faulkner's Jefferson, Mississippi, is closed. This is Big Sky country, stretching from Lonesome Dove, Texas, north to Arkansas and Missouri and west to the vast, unsettled lands of Montana. Life is as wild and perilous as the land: cattle rustling in Mexico, ambushes by renegade Indians, death by lynching, knife blade, snake bite, arrow, fire, and gunshot, and love that survives epic distances and years.

"This could make a story if there was anybody to tell it," Call tells a dying Augustus. There *is,* of course, someone to tell it, Larry McMurtry, whose earlier novels include *The Last Picture Show* and *Terms of Endearment.* Gus and Call, McMurtry's metamorphosed Western versions of Damon and Pythias, are radically different personalities joined together for the best part of a lifetime by inexplicable bonds that last beyond death and give rise to the most heroic trek-to-the-grave in memory. They are accompanied in the perverse odyssey of *Lonesome Dove* by a colorful entourage of drifters, brave men, and fugitives from the law: among the most memorable, Pea Eye and Deets, Newt and Jake Spoon. The women who haunt their lives and dreams—Clara, Elmira, Lorena—are as strong in adventure as the men, as stalwart as they in love.

What drives these legendary men and women to such bone-crushing, spirit-battering feats of physical and mental endurance? Why fight nature and man, endure hunger and fear, ride through dirt and desert and storm until their mounts drop beneath them, all to reach a place they have never seen for rewards they may never claim? Gus expresses his own feelings as he sets out for the beckoning unknown. "It would be a while before he had such a good shady porch to sit on, drinking the afternoon out. In Texas he had drunk to take his mind off the heat; in Montana, no doubt, it would be to take his mind off the cold. He didn't feel sad. The one thing he knew about Texas was that he was lucky to be leaving it alive."

Moving on. The Great American Myth.

Larry McMurtry. *Lonesome Dove.* 1985. Pocket.

## *Invisible Man,* by Ralph Ellison

Since its publication in 1952, Ralph Ellison's American classic has been considered the finest expression of the black experience in the New World. Humorously, bitingly, Ellison examines the paradox resulting from the concept that "most Afro-American difficulties sprang from our 'high visibility.'" The darker brother, Ellison has commented, "glowed . . . with such intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament."

Ellison's tormented protagonist, bruised by both self- and society-inflicted pounding, takes refuge in an urban hole-in-the-ground from which he narrates the story of his erratic journey (following expulsion from a small, prestigious, southern black college) northward toward Mecca, the world of neon-lighted dreams. Like McMurtry's Call and Gus, like Faulkner's Sutpen, this young black "moves on"—hoping to "move up." Unlike his western and southern counterparts, Ellison's adventurer is rewarded with little sense of accomplishment or movement. In his card games, the deck seems to be stacked; in his competitions the prizes seem to have been won. Opportunity turns into manipulation. He is not running his own race; he is being "run."

Strains of jazz resound through *Invisible Man,* along with the music of laughter—teasing, teary, raucous. Metaphors abound. The protagonist's warren is brilliantly lighted by 1,369 bulbs, light stolen from a tap on the lines of the Monopolated Light & Power company. "I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality." Often the most difficult person to see is oneself.

*Invisible Man* is a novel of the universal quest made specific through the black experience. The American dream reversed to nightmare. But all is not dark. Ellison's young black will "come out" of his hole. Emerge. Leaving behind an old skin, invisible still, but *out.* "And I suppose," he says, "it's damn well time."

Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man.* 1952. Random.

## *The Handmaid's Tale,* by Margaret Atwood

The time: within the memory span of many living today. The place: Gilead, a totalitarian enclave sealed off from the outside world. The story: a feminist *1984.*

In Margaret Atwood's dismal New American World promise and energy have been exhausted. Entropy has created a vacuum filled by repression. War and pollution have reduced the population to danger of extinction. A New Order as been forged to save the human race by strictly controlling it. Atwood's Offred examines her situation not in the light of 1,369 bulbs but in the twilight of memory and silence.

Freedom and mobility and individuality are unknown in the new Gilead—aptly if ironically named, since it is hoped that like the Biblical city it will be blessed with fecundity. The population is divided according to function: Handmaid, Guardian, Aunt, Wife, Eye (the futurist equivalent of Big Brother). Even the basic sense of self has been wrenched from Offred, Handmaid of Fred, a human birthing machine. "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am." (How bizarre that Columbus believed the world was not round but pear-shaped!)

A privileged few in Gilead enjoy old, sinful pleasures from "the time before"—cigarettes, liquor, sex—or more modest indulgences such as Scrabble or a fashion magazine. Others hold memories of more dangerous practices: a spark of daring flares in the spent and smothered Old World of Gilead. Offred finds the words of a joke from that other world scratched in the back of her cupboard: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (Don't Let the Bastards Wear You Down). The eyes of her Commander's chauffeur hint of complicity. A companion assigned with her to the household shopping disappears after giving Offred news of an organized resistance. Offred is left "Under His Eye," alone, with only the strength of a word to hold to: "Mayday" (*M'aider*). Help me. A word that leads back to the darkness of 1984, or toward the light, toward the possibility of further exploration, of more New Worlds.

Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1986. Fawcett.

## FOR FURTHER READING

The books included in the following reading list are organized geographically. Taken together, they reflect the ongoing effort of America's fiction writers to come to terms with a sense of place. Over the course of 500 years, the American landscape has been divided into many worlds. The familiar boundaries that define continents, countries, and regions suggest the more subtle imaginative mapping that takes place as writers react to the complex intermingling of humanity and geography. While not all of the authors listed below create self-contained, mythic worlds on the scope of Gárcia Márquez and Faulkner, they each add their own distinctive chorus to the ever-modulating anthem of the Americas.

### UNITED STATES

#### The South

Brown, Larry. *Big Bad Love.* 1990. Two worlds clash in Brown's short stories—the new, yuppified South, where women have raised their consciousness and taken charge of their sexuality, and the old, less ambiguous South, where good ol' boys load their pickup trucks with beer, tune in a little Hank Williams, and cruise the country roads. Algonquin.

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind.* 1936. Stately Tara, willful Scarlett O'Hara, magnetic Rhett Butler, the eternal American fascination with the tragedy of the Civil War are splashed in vivid technicolor across the pages of Mitchell's novel. Avon.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Three by Flannery O'Connor: Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away, A Good Man's Hard to Find.* 1983. Two novels and a collection of short stories by a master of detail and cadence. An essentially American rural south portrayed in all its Gothic agony and religious fanaticism. New American Library.

#### New York/the East Coast

Cheever, John. *The Stories of John Cheever.* 1978. These 61 stories chronicle a world no one has better described, the upper-middle-class-Protestant-city-and-vacation-home families whose buzzing spawned the term WASP. Ballantine.

Roth, Philip. *Zuckerman Unbound.* 1981. A New York Jewish take on the ageless myth of a son's struggles to free himself from the shadow of his father. Zuckerman attempts his separation through writing. Interplay between truth and fiction add to the interest. Fawcett.

Smith, Betty. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* 1943. A tree grows through a crack in the pavement. Francie Nolan grows up in an Irish working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, daughter of a charming, seldom-sober father and a scrubwoman mother—far from Cheever's enclaves. Harper.

#### American Caribbean/Puerto Rico/Florida

Sánchez, Luis Rafael. *Macho Comacho's Beat.* 1980. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. Sánchez's witty and garrulous depiction of a day in the life of San Juan inveighs against the frenetic consumerism and mindless amusements that to him represent the essence of Puerto Rico's gilded captivity. This "successive colony of two empires,"

whose leaders are currently underwriting quincentennial extravaganzas on a scale unequaled anywhere else in the hemisphere, is acerbically sketched in pulsating, colloquial prose. Pantheon.

Sánchez, Thomas. *Mile Zero.* 1989. Sánchez makes full use of the mythic possibilities of Key West, Florida. In this sprawling, luxuriantly eloquent novel—both mystery and epic—he explores the ripeness and the "implacable impermanence" of the tropics: "things went quickly dead, rot always filled the air, a fresh rot bearing the ironic breath of new beginnings." Sánchez is a "translator in Babylon," and his hypnotic sentences wrap themselves around our minds like the tangled vines of a tropical plant searching for the light. Random.

Shacochis, Bob. *Easy in the Islands.* 1984. The legendary white in the tropics, feeling his "superiority," bullying and machoing his way through the "easy" life. Shacochis illustrates—with a comic flair—the dark side of the colorful Caribbean, while revealing the innate dignity of the native residents of the islands. Penguin.

#### Wild West

Van Tilburg Clark, Walter. *The Oxbow Incident.* 1940. Raw action in the mythic West: a posse rides down three men charged with rustling cattle. Voices of reason—from merchant, preacher, and judge— lose out to the heat of blood lust. New American Library.

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian.* 1925. Wister's hero is the prototype of the strong, heroic cowboy (despite his name, his range is Wyoming) whose values are self-determined but highly moral. "Civilization" corrupts, nature ennobles. (Various editions available in paperback.)

#### Life in Middle America

Clemens, Samuel. *Huckleberry Finn.* 1885. Huck and Jim's odyssey on a raft down the Mississippi is America's picaresque adventure—the rugged individualist in flight from the shackles of civilization. Tall talk and boyhood escapades are underlaid with serious commentary on freedom and slavery. (Various editions available in paperback.)

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt.* 1922. Babbitt has become the symbol of the prosperous businessman gone wrong, the bourgeois become narrow-minded pomposity. Like Chauvin, Quisling, and Silhouette, Babbitt's name has become a part of our language. (Various editions available in paperback.)

#### The Black Experience

Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage.* 1990. A black freedman, less free than he believes, signs on a sailing ship to escape romantic and financial entanglements. In place of epic adventure on the high seas, Rutherford Calhoun finds himself serving the master of a slave-trading merchantman. Penguin.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved.* 1987. Morrison recounts the unendurable lot of blacks in America, from slave ship to Reconstruction. Beloved, dead at two under grotesque circumstances, finally leads to her mother Sethe's living life on her own terms. New American Library.

#### Hollywood/the West Coast

Fisher, Carrie. *Postcards from the Edge.* 1987. Hoping to forge her own career, the daughter of an aging-but-unbowed film star battles through drugs, mother-daughter animosities, and blasted romance to a hard-won sense of self-worth. Contemporary Hollywood by an insider. Pocket.

West, Nathanael. *The Day of the Locust.* 1939. An "ordinary" human being, a bookkeeper from Iowa, wanders among the fringe characters of Tinseltown; the Hollywood premiere that serves as the novel's climax exposes the grotesque face of mythic glamour in detail worthy of Bosch. New American Library.

### LATIN AMERICA

#### Mexico

Fuentes, Carlos. *The Death of Artemio Cruz.* 1964. Translated by Sam Hileman. Artemio Cruz is the symbol of the failure of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, an opportunist who uses the revolution, marriage, and craft to achieve power. Told in flashback from Cruz's deathbed. Farrar.

Ruflo, Juan. *Pedro Páramo.* 1969. Translated by Lysander Kemp. Mexico's foremost cult novel. Juan Preciado returns to a village to find his father, Pedro Páramo, and to claim "what was owed him." Along the way he realizes he has descended into a world of living death. Grove Weidenfeld.

#### Cuba

Carpentier, Alejo. *The Lost Steps.* 1956. Translated by Harriet de Onis. A musicologist's search for the origins of music lead him from city to village to jungle; his progress follows the backward flow of time to Eden where, as a modern man, he cannot remain. Farrar.

#### Guatemala

Asturias, Miguel Angel. *El Señor Presidente.* 1975. Translated by Frances Partridge. This early novel by a Nobel Prize winner offers a slightly surreal, definitely sinister portrayal of a dictator. The tyrant remains a shadow, merely enhancing the atmosphere of terror and oppression. Macmillan.

#### Colombia

García Márquez, Gabriel. *Love in the Time of Cholera.* 1988. Translated by Edith Grossman. The most cited example of a magical realist author, García Márquez here spins a saga of love that endures a lifetime. Love, in fact, in all its guises—marital, "emergency love" of 600 women, geriatric courtship—flourishes like orchids in the jungle. Penguin.

#### Argentina

Cortázar, Julio. *Blow Up and Other Stories.* 1967. Translated by Paul Blackburn. Michelangelo Antonioni translated the title story to film: a photographer "innocently interferes" in a scene that is not what it seems. Appropriate to Cortázar's writing, in which the illogical is the iron rule of reality. Pantheon.

Puig, Manuel. *Kiss of the Spider Woman.* 1979. Translated by Thomas Colchie. Puig worshipped the Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. His protagonist uses that mythic world, recounting plots to entertain his cellmate and win his admiration. Political oppression boils on both sides of the prison walls. Random.

#### Peru

Vargas Llosa, Mario. *The Green House.* 1968. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. A broad screen of characters and backgrounds: nuns, Indians, a small-town gang, a Japanese trader, a blind piano player, set against jungle and desert. An epic essentially New World in its enormity of scope. Farrar.

URUGUAY

Quiroga, Horacio. *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories.* 1976. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Called the Poe of Latin America, Quiroga wrote stories for children, psychological studies of madness and delusion, tales of doom and danger in the jungle. Quiroga's own life often paralleled these adventures. University of Texas.

CHILE

Allende Isabel. *The House of the Spirits.* 1985. Translated by Magda Bogin. Allende left her native Chile following the overthrow of the democratic socialist government of Salvador Allende. A letter to her grandfather, left behind in Chile, grew into this panoramic saga of three generations of the Trueba Family. Bantam.

Neruda, Pablo. *Memoirs.* 1977. Translated by Hardie St. Martin. Neruda was Latin America's most beloved poet, a champion of the "simple man."He was often exiled—by politics and by career—but always returned to sing of his sliver of a nation bound between mountain and sea. Penguin.

BRAZIL

Amado, Jorge. *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon.* 1962. Translated by James L. Taylor and William L. Grossman. The rhythms and lushness of coastal Brazil are embodied in Amado's sensual women. Gabriela comes to Ilhéus looking for survival. She climbs the economic ladder from cook to mistress to wife. The political and domestic intrigues of an involuted small city are richly detailed. Avon.

Piñon, Nélida. *The Republic of Dreams.* 1989. Translated by Helen Lane. A huge and complex family chronicle, this novel is the prototypical account of the immigrant, a drama of ambition and of failure and of success—and of the very ambiguity of those words. Despite the title, it is memory more than dreams that drives the action. Knopf.

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Dates listed following titles in this bibliography reflect original publication. Publishers, which appear following the annotations, reflect in-print paperback editions, where available.

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Let's Talk About It

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