

## The Library of America interviews Ilan Stavans about Becoming Americans

In connection with the publication in October 2009 of *Becoming Americans: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing*, edited by Ilan Stavans, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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*Spanning more than 700 pages, Becoming Americans collects selections from 85 writers from 45 countries in entries that range from 1623 to 2003. How did you decide which writings to include?*

My objective was to allow immigrants to offer a kaleidoscopic view of their experience. The vastness of material is overwhelming. Ever since the arrival of the first “settlers”—a word that, in my own personal dictionary, is synonymous with immigrants—there have been wrenching accounts of their arrival and acculturation. I am an immigrant from Mexico, so I know firsthand the ambivalence the voyage engenders. I read widely and deeply across time and place. I visualized a book that would be open, full of contradictions. My original manuscript was almost twice as long. In trimming it, I looked for pieces that were at once unique and representative.

*Many famous immigrant writers are featured in the volume—Phillis Wheatley, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Mann, Christopher Isherwood, W. H. Auden, Edwidge Danticat—but you also include wonderfully written accounts by much less well-known indentured servants, farmers, and real estate entrepreneurs, among others. Do you find that these “bottom-up” accounts get at aspects of the immigrant experience the better known writers miss?*

I sought to make *Becoming Americans* democratic and pluralistic, featuring many types of writers, not just literary luminaries. My editorial criterion was simple: the content was to be representative and the style powerful. I sought material from different walks of life: an inmate (James Revel), a librettist

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(Lorenzo Da Ponte), a social reformer (Jacob Riis), an actress (Fanny Kemble), a tobacco worker (Bernardo Vega), the wife of a physicist (Laura Fermi), a Holocaust survivor (Joseph Pell), a teacher (Frank McCourt), a political activist and professor (Edward Said). Immigrant writing doesn't necessarily end up in the pages of *The New Yorker*. It has many qualities and I wanted them on display amply and unabashedly.

*You note in your introduction that “each case, each circumstance is different; each era of American life has had its particular pressures and expectations.” Over the almost 400 years that these writings cover, what are some of the changes these selections capture?*

The story of immigration is, by definition, about movement. If it has an essence, it is the idea of home: What attachment do I have to my place of origin? Why did I need to depart? How much will stay with me when I leave? And when will my new country become my home? The essence changes with time. Ours is a global culture in which travel is easy. A 17th-century immigrant rarely had the chance to return for a quick visit to the past the way some of us can today. However, the most dramatic change in immigrant literature lies elsewhere. One of the most striking features of *Becoming Americans* is the way immigrant writers have revamped the English language: from the account of 18th-century slave Ayuba Suleiman Daillo, for whom arrival meant outright submission, to the work of Russian émigré Anya Ulinich, who came after Glasnost. Shakespeare's tongue has been transformed into something more elastic, less monolithic.

*Felipe Alfau seems to get it right in the opening to the excerpt from Chromos: “The moment one learns English, complications set in.” Almost every selection grapples with what you call the “verbal dilemma,” the immigrant’s struggle with learning a new language and preserving or losing her native tongue. It’s often a very complex encounter: Abraham Cahan describes the resentment Yiddish-speaking Jews felt toward Russian Jews who continued to speak Russian in the New World. The grandfather in “Mistress” seems lost until he starts taking English classes. Richard Rodriguez cherishes his childhood years when only Spanish was spoken at home and seems to lose his father as the family adopts English. Do you think that the complex feelings involved in dealing with this language crisis was what drove so many of the volume’s contributors to become writers?*

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My own experience is perhaps emblematic. As I wrote in my memoir *On Borrowed Words*, I arrived in New York City in 1985 with a lexicon of approximately a hundred words. My acquisition of English ran parallel to my Americanization: the more I understood, the less awkward I felt in this land. Yet the English I encountered wasn't uncontaminated. What I heard most often was Spanglish, a mix of English and Spanish. And while I was able to distinguish between high-brow and popular parlance, these two spheres made me understand that the real immigrant experience isn't told in a pure, unadulterated style. The immigrants' voices, their goals, and their achievements vary considerably. Nabokov, for instance, is a stylistic craftsman, so is Alfau. They hope to write as if they are native English writers, although their degree of foreignness obviously betrays their origins; in other words, they write as if in translation. In contrast, Jamaica Kincaid is perfectly natural in her English as is Edwidge Danticat, perhaps because the two arrived in the U.S. as children. Every immigrant reinvents the language anew. In fact, I'm convinced that it is thanks to immigrants that English remains vital.

*Humor fills many of the selections and brightens what sometimes otherwise could be quite grim introductions to America. So which immigrants are the funniest? Do you think much of America's "exceptionalism" comes from so many different ethnic comic sensibilities combining to create American humor?*

You've touched on a crucial feature of the anthology: immigrants have an enviable quality of knowing how to laugh healthily and with gusto. Every immigrant represents a class of humoristic traditions, that of the original homeland and the American one. Look at "The Mother Tongue Between Two Slices of Rye" by Gary Shteyngart; he is a perfect example of the immigrant as *schlemiel*, a Yiddish word that encapsulates his penchant for gag scenes. In "Breaking Down the Glass Walls of Language" Ariel Dorfman's humor, on the other hand, is strictly linguistic, pointing to the way Spanish and English create all sorts of complications when they clash. This is what ethnic humor is about: the capacity to see the immigrant's odyssey simultaneously from the inside and outside. Immigrants laugh themselves out of frustration.

*Becoming Americans offers quite a variety of approaches writers have taken to describe their immigrant experiences: the immediacy of letters, the reflectiveness of memoirs, the concision of poetry, the imaginative con-*

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*juring of fiction. How do you think these different approaches get at different aspects of the experience?*

Hopefully these approaches allow the reader to see the experience intimately from a variety of angles. Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry are all about the same truth; what distinguishes them is the way they reach that truth. My objective was to capture the immigrant in the act of reflecting through all sorts of channels, producing a *Rashomon*-like effect.

*The anthology has the fascinating yet unorthodox approach of organizing the pieces according to the date of the immigrant's arrival. Since many of the pieces recount the experiences of immigrants from different eras coming from the same parts of the world, resonances and echoes abound. What conclusions can we draw from these accounts about what is distinctive about, say, the European immigrant experience as contrasted with the Asian or Latin American or African immigrant experience?*

World War II might be said to be the turning point: before it, the majority of immigrants to the United States came from Europe and were Caucasian; after it, they come from the so-called Third World and have all shades of color. In other words, in the last 60 years the country has undergone a profound remapping of its DNA as a result of a “browning” progression. The chronology at the end of *Becoming Americans* lists the benchmarks in U.S. immigrant history, highlighting not only demographic information but also the way xenophobia has shaped the nation in particular moments. The chronology should help put the entries in the anthology in historical context. Keep in mind that for European immigrants the Statue of Liberty—“Mother of Exiles” in the words of Emma Lazarus’ sonnet “The New Colossus”—is a symbol of their ordeal, whereas for those who came after 1945 there was no welcome by Lady Liberty. Also, I made sure to include the rite of passage of groups not commonly portrayed as immigrants, like slaves and Puerto Ricans. For what was slavery if not forced immigration? And even though the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917 made all Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens, their experience of coming to the mainland continues to be one of immigrants.

*Do you have any favorites among the selections?*

I have many: the resonant poems by Chinese immigrants written around 1910 on Angel Island, in San Francisco Bay, which served as a detention center as a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “A

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Wedding in Brownsville”—a magnificent story that reminds me of both Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence on Owl Creek Bridge” and Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Secret Miracle”—about a man who travels to a party to see acquaintances from the mother country only to realize that they are all ghosts, or that maybe it is he who is dead; Julia de Burgos’ poem “Farewell in Welfare Island,” a Puerto Rican account of isolation (de Burgos died an anonymous death shortly after the poem was composed); and Jhumpa Lahiri’s story “The Third and Final Continent,” about Bengali immigrants from India struggling to find a place of their own.

*You have taken great pains to offer a mix of selections written by men and women. Dare you characterize how their accounts of the immigrant experience differ?*

Up until the last three decades, the male immigrants in *Becoming Americans* for the most part perceived themselves as outgoing, eager to build a home in the new country but refusing to be physically bound by that home, which they understood to be a trampoline. In contrast, cultural patterns made female immigrants domestic, dedicated to the well-being of the family. Although there are visible breaks as the reader travels through the anthology, the equation irrevocably changes with the entries by Judith Ortíz Cofer, Marie Arana, Marilyn Chin, and Julia Alvarez as women refuse to accept a secondary role and become protagonists in their own lives. Which brings me to another feature of the anthology: as the reader roams through its pages, the mores that define American society are transformed: in one piece a daughter is forbidden from talking to a potential lover—a century later the incarnation of that daughter in another piece explores a free sexual encounter with her suitor. In an excerpt from his 1873 novel, *Annie Reilly*, John McElgun delves into the standard gender roles for immigrant girls at the end of the 19th century. Forty years later Mary Antin, in an excerpt from her memoir, *Promised Land*, wrestles with her position as a woman in the first half of 20th century. Almost 100 years later Anita Desai reaches well beyond those confines. Similarly, the world expects from 18th-century organist and schoolmaster Gottlieb Mittelberger an outgoing, conquering effort while the account that Reinaldo Arenas offers as a gay Cuban immigrant who escapes the Communist regime of Fidel Castro in the 1980s shows the degree to which gender is a form of prison.

*While I enjoyed the many accounts by adult immigrants, certainly the most*

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*poignant selections were those that recreated the experience of coming to America as a child. Children, as you note, “often possess a kind of double consciousness, allowing them especially sharp insights into the ongoing struggle between native and adopted cultures.” Does the child’s experience of immigration also change over time?*

The act of coming to America invariably depends on the “when.” Poets W. H. Auden and Joseph Brodsky, the first from England, the second from Russia, came to the United States as adults, their worldview fully formed. Their appreciation of the tribulations is fundamentally different from Henry Roth and Junot Díaz, the first from Prussia, the second from the Dominican Republic. Their books *Call It Sleep* (which in my mind is the best novel ever written about immigration to America, and from the viewpoint of a child) and *Drown* address the uncertainties that result from arriving at a place you don’t know at an age when you’re still unable to articulate cohesive thoughts. *Becoming Americans* is filled with stories from an early age: in *Barrio Boy*, Ernesto Galarza, from Mexico, tells of the confusion he felt upon encountering people with different attire in a hotel in Sacramento; in *Native Speaker*, Chang-rae Lee, from Korea, talks about the quiet rivalries between Korean-Americans and African-Americans in Queens.

*You close the collection with the one entry not by a first-generation immigrant: a selection from Hunger of Memory by Richard Rodriguez. Why end with that piece?*

I aspired to bring the story of immigrants to its next level: what the children of immigrants do with their parents’ memory. Often the journeys of immigrants leave deep wounds from which it is impossible to heal. It is left to the successors—born and bred here and native English speakers—to give meaning to that journey. At some point, while editing *Becoming Americans*, I thought that the volume should not be about immigrants alone and that their children should play a bigger role as contributors. I resisted that temptation because I wanted the immigrants’ own testimonies, no matter how fractured they are, to shape the narrative. It is up to others to tackle their legacy.

*In your contribution to the volume, from “Autobiographical Essay,” you write “The rise of multiculturalism, which perceives the melting pots, a soup of diverse and at times incompatible backgrounds, has made the word ‘America’ even more troublesome, more evasive and abstract. Is*

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*America a compact whole, a unit? Is it a sum of ethnic groups unified by a single language and a handful of patriotic symbols? Is it a Quixotic dream where total assimilation is impossible, where multiculturalism is to lead to disintegration?" Has compiling the anthology led you to answers to these very thought-provoking questions?*

*Becoming Americans* is my love letter to the United States, a tolerant, warm-hearted country that has been extraordinarily generous to me as an immigrant. Among other things, the country has allowed me to explore my talents to the limit.