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“Help, I’m a ‘New’ Teacher!”

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Books Beyond Borders: Uncommon Wealth

By Karen Dunnagan and Jessie R. Hite

Sometimes when we ask questions, we really must find the answer for ourselves. This happened last year at the 2007 KCTE/LA conference when Dr. John Hagaman graciously asked if we had any suggestions for expanding the view from the *Kentucky English Bulletin*. I piped up to note that, while our Kentucky Commonwealth is rich with brilliant, award-winning writers of enough books to last most readers a lifetime, maybe it would also be interesting to travel beyond our state borders once in a while. When I asked for some exciting international book recommendations, Dr. Hagaman, ever the master educator, turned my request into an assignment—rather like a “mapquest” for readers who want to go off-road.

When traveling, it is usually wise, and more fun, to take a friend, so I invited my former colleague, Mr. Jessie Hite, to join me in searching out some fascinating titles from international authors. We now invite our Kentucky colleagues in English education to join our trek. What follows is a distillation of a year of reading around the globe, and the essence is a few uncommonly good books across time zones and historical periods. These stories are told in voices seldom heard, and they have the power to take us deep into their magic. The itinerary for our excursion includes Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, 17th century Persia, and Israel.

If you are willing to take a risk on a thrilling ride, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by Mohsin Hamid, is one that will have you gripping the rail. The story unwinds slowly at first as a conversation between a contemporary Pakistani man, an MBA from Princeton, and his unidentified male café companion. Readers could imagine

that the unnamed younger man is, perhaps, from the U. S., perhaps an intelligence worker, but certainly a stranger in this land of hidden doorways and internal riddles. The conversation is led by the quite singular and polite voice of the profoundly dignified Pakistani gentleman as he engages the young listener with stories of his life up to the very moment that they find themselves sitting alone together in the café. As night falls, the meal and the conversation draw to a close, and the stories of both men seem destined to meet in a dramatic twist that leaves readers with questions and unresolved issues. Visiting this world may cause you to look over your shoulder as you “eaves drop” on two men speaking softly a few tables away from where you are comfortably curled on your sofa reading a book late into the night.

Leaving Lahore for Tel Aviv to meet *A Woman in Jerusalem*, by A. B. Yehoshua, is more than just a series of difficult border crossings. Yehoshua introduces readers to beautiful names and faces that are seen only too briefly before the next detonation obliterates them from the page and the life of the novel—but not from our sense of loss. So it is when a newspaper prints the account of an unidentified woman killed in a bomb raid on a local shopping area, an adjacent company’s personnel director becomes obsessed with the need to discover the woman’s identity and learn the story of her life. What follows is a journey to unlock the woman’s past and piece together reasons why she has such a hold on the minds of the people involved in her short life. The impact of her life and death leaves a remarkable impression on the man who must verify her existence and document her passing. These days, in Israel, and elsewhere, the challenges to

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finding a reason to live are as compelling as those leading to the decision to die, and this novel asks readers to make a choice.

Now turn east to Iran, but set the time-traveler back a few centuries—to the 17th, actually, precisely the time of a bright comet's fall to earth in the moonlit high desert of Iran's ancestral land of Persia. Think red: brick, cinnamon, scarlet, crimson, blood red—millions of strands of wool woven by countless hands into a thousand variations to make soft the footfalls of rulers. *The Blood of Flowers*, by Anita Amirrezani, begins when a village elder leaves the warmth of his carpet and the safety of his fire to find the meaning of a comet's blaze and foretell its mysteries. In the comet's trail, marriages fail, children die, poverty comes to some as wealth comes to others. Can lives really be changed by a comet's plunge into earth's atmosphere? What dares to disturb your universe?

Extend your visit in Iran, but this time on a route that takes us through England first. In *The Saffron Kitchen*, by Yaasmin Crowther, the entire novel turns on the news of a death, a sacrifice one might say, that calls for the thoroughly modern British woman, Sara, to leave her family and their successful business in London to return to her mother's birthplace in Iran. As Sara traces clues of her mother's secret path toward the decisions that many émigrés make with equal measures of hope and longing, she becomes able to see her own life truly as it was shaped in place and time. Journeying with Sara, we tour a very different Iran from the one described in contemporary media -- a wonderful way to appreciate the beauty of a land and people before they are changed forever by war. Following Sara's map, we return to an amazing family's history in a

time rich with hope.

It is one thing to retrace one's own family journey, but it seems quite another to take on the sorrow of a nation of families in search of sanctuary and life as they knew it. This, however, is exactly what award-winning journalist Ann Jones does in her first-person account of her experiences in *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan*. Jones refuses to accept the seemingly insoluble chaos and misery that continues to destroy and redefine the people of Afghanistan. Jones embarks on her mission to act as a "cohort of one" to live as and with the Afghan people and help rebuild their social order. The touchstone for her embarkation is the often quoted Tacitus whose advice for making peace in his time was to "... eliminate the causes for war ..." and in so doing "... put in order his own house ..." To date, Jones's life and sacrifices have not yet brought peace to Kabul, but her inspiring stories of her daily struggles and those of others in this place of distrust and endless danger will shock, sadden, enrage, and, ultimately, inspire.

Hold on to that sense of inspiration long enough to get through the maze of Sri Lanka's tales of appearing and disappearing actors on the world's political stage. Michael Ondaatje, author of the unforgettable book, *The English Patient*, offers up another magical spirit in the form of *Anil's Ghost*. In Sri Lanka's sweltering heat and threatening political climate, the beautiful and brilliant Anil, a Sri Lankan native educated and residing in the U. S. as a forensic anthropologist, is sent to solve cases of "disappearance." War crime tribunals cannot take place until remains are examined and identified. Anil must examine human remains from the many wars that mark the

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region in an effort to determine accountability for potential reparations. She enters Sri Lanka as a kind of homecoming, though her initial joy of recognition is soon replaced with fear and regret. Her work is methodical, arduous, and tragic. Her story of the "ghost" she finds is a mystical and powerful reminder that legacies cannot be created or destroyed—only acknowledged.

A journey through these books awaits anyone wishing the luxury of arm-chair-travel: the power to "deplane at will" when a route or destination does not suit. Closing a book to return to the relative safety of our own borders is simple. The characters in these novels go on without us, and their stories will be heard by others. If we choose, however, we can help them tell their experiences, and in doing so share with them uncommon wealth.

Books reviewed in this column:

Amirrezvani, Anita. *The Blood of Flowers*. 2007. 368p. Little, Brown, and Company, \$23.99 (0-316-065-765).

Crowther, Yaasmin. *The Saffron Kitchen*. 2006. 258p. Penguin Books, \$26.00 (978-0-143054-344).

Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. 2007. 241p. Harvest Books, \$29.95 (978-0-385-66344-1).

Jones, Ann. *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan*. 2006. 348p. Henry Holt & Co., \$24.00 (0-8050-7884-3).

Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. 2000. 307p. Vintage International, (0-375-41053-8).

Yehoshua, A. B. *A Woman in Jerusalem*. 2004. 220p. Harcourt, (978-0-15-101-2268).

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Jessie completed his degree in English education at The Ohio State University with a specialization in comparative literature. Although his health challenges keep him from serving as a teacher, he remains committed to expanding his own and others' love for reading widely.