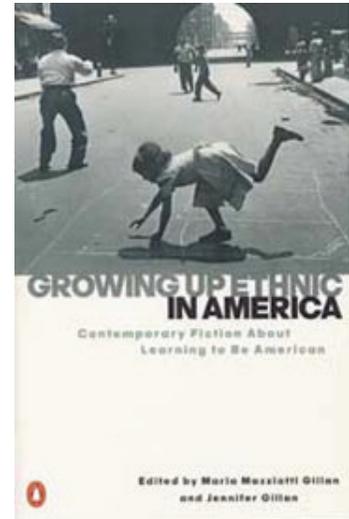


Voices  
from the  
Gaps*Growing up  
Ethnic in America*

America is going through a slow and sometimes stagnant process of self-discovery. It is discovering that it is not a monolithic culture marching along the path of a single narrative, but rather that it is comprised of a cultural plurality that has many different and often contradictory stories to tell. Maria Mazziotti Gillian and Jennifer Gillian's anthology *Growing Up Ethnic In America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American* embraces this new level of cultural self-awareness and encourages further discussion on the nature of American social identity.

With this book, the Gillians have provided a collection of fiction and non-fiction works that examine America from perspectives outside of the dominant culture. They have given these perspectives a collective importance while preserving the unique nature of each individual voice. They have shown how "being an American" is a complex experience that is difficult to define. And they have done so with a collection of works that are well-written, insightful, engaging and a joy to read.

The word "ethnic" in the title of this anthology could easily be substituted with the term "outsider." The works in this piece deal with characters who find themselves outside of American society. Their skin is the wrong color. Their accent is too thick. Their customs are too exotic. Through both their own self-perceptions and the views of others, they are not "American" enough. In her introduction, Jennifer Gillian refers to these shared experiences, as ones of "dislocation and distortion." These themes are evident throughout the book. In Nash Candelaria's "The Day the Cisco Kid Shot John Wayne," the seven year old protagonist identifies himself among the Mexican villains rather than the white heroes in movie westerns. The young African American characters in Afaa Michael Weaver's "Honey Boy" go swimming in a white neighborhood pool and are met with anger and violence. The aim of this collection is to work out of this outsider status in order to validate the experiences of ethnic minorities as truly American experiences. These works are effectively held together by this collective goal.



Publisher: Penguin  
Books, 1999

Reviewed by Christopher  
Thomas



# *Growing up Ethnic in America*

But within this continuity of experience, there is also a strong sense of the uniqueness of each contribution. The authors of these pieces come out of a particular frame of reference defined both by their ethnicity and by their own individual experience. Jennifer Gillian discusses this as the “many shades and shapes of American faces,” the “many ways to be American.” This diversity is reflected in the wide range of characters contained within the individual works. In Sherman Alexie’s “This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona,” Thomas Builds the Fire tells stories filled with insight and wisdom that are virtually ignored by his entire tribe. Maxine in Bebe Moore Campbell’s “The Best Deal In America” is masterful in her ability, acquired from growing up poor and black in Louisiana, to manipulate salespersons into giving her discounts. In Maria Mazziotti Gillian’s own contribution, “Carlton Fredericks and My Mother” an Italian immigrant mother constructs an American identity by constantly listening to and imitating radio broadcasts.

In a society where the term “diversity” has often become an empty buzzword, the Gillians have shown a glimpse of the various frames of reference that are truly out there. Thus, in this collection, Americans are at once Italian, Asian, African, Native American, Jewish, Hispanic, and German as well as resourceful, manipulative, lonely, singled out, strong, afraid, shallow, and passionate. All of the characters in this work are struggling to define themselves amidst an American landscape, but they are often traveling along different paths. They want to preserve their culture. They want to assimilate into the mainstream. They want to survive. This book captures the rich diversity of experience of being ethnic in America.

With the immediacy of these themes and the rich expressiveness of the prose within these texts, it is curious that the editors saw a need to impose artificial categories onto this collection. The book is loosely divided based on general themes, “Performing,” “Crossing,” “Negotiating,” and “Bridging.” Gillian describes these groupings as a progression of “stages involved in claiming one’s American identity.” But, by her own admission, most of the works defy the constraints of these simple definitions. Gish Jen’s “What Means Switch” is placed under “Negotiating.” But this story about a Chinese American girl who fabricates exotic stories about the Chinese could have just as easily been categorized as “Performing.”



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Given the editors' own misgivings, it would have been best to simply leave these divisions out. These texts speak well enough for themselves and readers will easily be able to draw out themes of cultural assimilation and cultural identity, acceptance and rejection, divisiveness and reconciliation. By virtue of simply being placed together in this anthology, the works beg to be compared and contrasted without any artificial impetus. However, this is a minor structural flaw that does not greatly distract from the power of this collection.

In the end, *Growing Up Ethnic In America* is a compelling and complex collection of works insightfully addressing the issue of American identity. The book is at once emotionally charged, quietly profound, and intensely moving. In short, it is a reflection of the many faces of American society.