

FROM: Sally Donatello (MALS '92)
MALS Book Group

TO: MALS Students and Alumni

RE: Selection of Books Discussed

Below is a list of books discussed during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age by David B. Morris
Discussion Leader: Heyward Brock
June 23, 2009

The bio-medical model of health and illness that has dominated the American view of health care needs to be re-assessed in light of a bio-cultural model that can account for the inextricable relationship between health/illness and culture. In a time when our society is rapidly aging and the national debate regarding universal health care is most intense, this need is important. Dr. Morris' illuminating book on illness and culture is most helpful and insightful in leading us to understand the issues involved and what is at stake for our future.

The Botany of Desire by Michael Pollan
Discussion Leader: David Smith
September 15, 2009

The modern world has an ever-increasing involvement with scientific matters, both at the personal and societal levels. However, the technical details of many issues can be daunting and the conscientious lay person may feel overwhelmed. Pollan's book presents thorough discussions of human involvement with four plants: apples, tulips, potatoes and marijuana. In each case he gives clear and historically accurate background and then brings these examples to highly relevant modern application. Along the way the reader learns about who Johnny Appleseed really was and what the legacy of his evangelical zeal for apples is in our time. For example, it is surprising to learn that modern apples are clones created by grafting. Agribusiness and genetic manipulation of crops are examined with the potato as an example. Pollan takes the reader through the reality of life for the farmer, the environmental impact and the intertwined financial aspects of large scale food production. The botanical changes in the marijuana plant in recent years

are fascinating science and have had substantial social impacts as the potency of the product has increased. There are, of course, many other areas of daily life that have scientific aspects. It is imperative that the 21st century has an informed citizenry that appreciates the complexity of the world and also understands some of the historical contexts. This book is a significant step in that direction and is therefore an excellent subject for MALS with its strong multidisciplinary focus.

Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America by

Linda Lawrence Hunt

Discussion Leader: Anne Boylan

October 20, 2009

I chose *Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk across Victorian America*, because the book "works" on several levels. First, it's a great story, readable and engrossing. Through it, readers get a concrete, accessible portrait of a woman's life and that of her family. We can visualize phenomena that are sometimes abstractions, such as immigration, the nature of family economies, motherhood and child-rearing, the frontier, epidemics, and natural disasters. The story of the walk that Helga and her daughter, Clara, undertook connects readers to a variety of historical events, including the dress reform and suffrage movements, the economic crisis of the 1890s, the 1896 election, and settlement houses. But the book also forces readers to think about how women's experiences shaped American history, and why understanding their experiences re-shapes how we think about that history. And it helps readers to understand the crucial importance of documents and sources to the writing of all history. Without documents, there is no history, and women left many fewer documents than men. The omissions, silences, gaps, and contradictions in the documentary record illuminate the process of writing history, too, because Linda Hunt had to decide which versions of Helga's story were credible. Finally, the book requires readers to come to terms with the behavior and decisions of Helga's children, and in the process it asks some important questions about the gender system that shaped her and them.

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson

Discussion Leader: Martha Carothers

November 10, 2009

Three Cups of Tea is the narrative sojourn of Greg Mortenson who climbed K2 and found himself rescued in the midst of a small village in Pakistan. "One evening, he went to bed by a yak dung fire a mountaineer who'd lost his way, and one morning, by the time he'd shared a pot of butter tea with his hosts and laced up

his boots, he'd become a humanitarian who'd found a meaningful path to follow for the rest of his life." His interaction with the villagers set him on a life quest to build schools for educating the children, particularly young girls, in Pakistan and Afghanistan. As a foreigner Mortenson was able to assimilate with another culture. The book relays the ways and means by which Mortenson gained understanding of the Balti people and how the Balti people came to know him as family according to their custom of sharing cups of tea: he was a stranger with the first cup of tea, a friend with the second cup, and family with the third cup.

This book was selected as the common reader for University of Delaware First Year Experience (FYE) students as they entered UD this 2009 fall semester. This region of the world has international attention, yet all the while Mortenson continues to return and build schools. Mortenson spoke with FYE students during the first week of classes and provided insight into his vision and experiences. While the book discusses his repeated failures (including personal and family), Mortenson spoke about pursuing his mission as well as the broader call to action of humanitarians at home and around the world. His talk reinforced his growing awareness that "the Balti held the key to a kind of uncomplicated happiness that was disappearing in the developing world." Mortenson's integration of his childhood and family values with what he learned from the Balti people in the context of today's international strife prompts our own personal reflection.

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers
Discussion Leader: Kevin Kerrane
January 19, 2010

I picked *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers because it's a great example of human-interest journalism, telling the story of a huge event through the experiences of a single family, and of one fascinating man in particular. Almost all of the events are reconstructed from interviews--but instead of hearing the retrospective words of the characters as Eggers originally transcribed them, we are taken into the hearts and minds of these characters as events unfold with dramatic immediacy. And through flashbacks we're also given a fresh version of the American immigrant story, following the experiences of a truly good man whose work ethic and family values are exemplary. Finally, as this man is unjustly incarcerated and senselessly humiliated, we see larger social problems--particularly in the mismanagement of both the Katrina disaster and the War on Terror.

The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation by
Matt Ridley

Discussion Leader: Karen Rosenberg

February 16, 2010

I chose the book *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation* by Matt Ridley, because it takes an evolutionary perspective on a topic that is usually examined philosophically or in the context of religion, namely why humans help each other and live in cooperative societies when self-interest might seem to encourage them otherwise. The book combines work done in the last part of the 20th century in two seemingly unrelated fields, namely evolutionary biology and economics, using the overlapping model of game theory. It is an extremely accessible look into a topic that has something for everyone. Ridley is a scientific journalist who writes clearly for a wide audience.

Homer and Langley by E.L. Doctorow

Discussion Leader: Joan DeFattore

March 2, 2010

When the MALS book group was kind enough to invite me to come, I looked at earlier selections and saw that they tended toward nonfiction. Sally indicated that the group would be open to any kind of reading, so I thought that it might be interesting to look at a work of contemporary literature that is based on fact. That approach seemed attractive because it would allow us to discuss both the factual background of the novel and the author's creative use of that material. I had just read E.L. Doctorow's new novel, *Homer and Langley*, and thought that it would appeal to the MALS group. In real life, Homer and Langley Collyer were born in the 1880s and died in 1947. Langley Collyer, in particular, was the ultimate pack rat. After their deaths in their home on Fifth Avenue in New York City, police found the house stuffed to the ceiling with old newspapers and objects of various kinds, such as typewriters, pianos, bicycles, chairs, and umbrellas. The centerpiece was a Model T Ford in the living room. Among the changes Doctorow made to the real-life story was his extension of the brothers' lives into the 1970s. In his work, the isolated, blind Homer Langley becomes the "eyes" through which the reader may view a panorama of American history as it intruded on the increasingly closed-in Fifth Avenue home.