

**New York City Area Swarthmore Alumni Reading Groups**  
**U.S. Fiction Rethinking Family, Community, Borders, and Nation**  
2007-08

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**Study Questions and Topics for the first month's readings, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century short stories by Austin, Sin Far, and Yeziarska:**

**Mary Austin**

The meanings of "The Walking Woman" may exceed the "three truths" about life that the narrator says were the morals of the wandering woman's life story. For instance, what do you make of the detail that there is something crooked or awry in the woman's face, "as if she had a twist all through her" (553), but this strange look disappears when she tells her thoughts and feelings to a sympathetic listener (550)? She also says ("as if it pricked her," the narrator reveals) that one of the things bothering her is "the looking and the seeming" (551): what do you think this means? There is also a rumor that the Wandering Woman walks with a limp, yet the narrator says she saw her footsteps to be perfectly even: what do you make of this detail?

In what ways is it important that it's a *woman* who wanders? You might discuss your sense of traditional stories of women's roles on the "frontier," including the U.S. Southwest where this story is set, compared to the woman in this Austin story. Note that the Walking Woman wears men's boots (549) and that her other name is "The Borderer": meaning?

What can we learn about the narrator's class, education, character, and values from this story?

How does "The Walking Woman" use references to Southwestern landscape, culture, etc.?

**Sui Sin Far**

There is a "betrayal" at the center of the story. Discuss who betrays whom, and why: what motives are suggested or implied? How could the protagonist be fooled in the first place? How do you understand her reactions, once she decides that Mark Carson has betrayed her?

Regarding the portrait of Carson, how do you understand his behavior? What are his motives? What do you make of his insistence that Pan can and should be a white woman?

Does this story narrated by a mixed race woman end by suggesting that Chinese and white races and cultures should never mix and must remain separate? Or does the story's end suggest something different, that mixture can't take place without pain until those with the most power change their ways?

What role does the toddler play at the end? Is it ambiguous who the mother is?

What is the meaning of the story's title?

Discuss the two careers of Sui Sin Far and her sister, as summarized in the introductory material. How do you think we should understand the different choices that the sisters made regarding what kinds of writers they would become?

## Anzia Yeziarska

“How I Found America” is structured via a series of undulations: from despair to ecstatic hope in an escape and a solution, then disillusionment, then new hope, etc. One of the interesting things such a pattern sets up is that it links different forms of oppression in the “Old” and “New” Worlds, unlike the traditional American immigrant success story, which contrasts old oppression with new freedom. Obviously there are no sweat shops in rural Russia, but consider some parallels that link the family’s terror at the Czar’s Cossacks with what is most frightening and disillusioning in Lower East Side New York life.

The narrator’s emotional life is one of extremes: infinite hope, rage, despair. Discuss how the story’s voice as well as her actions captures this intensity in her life. In what ways is her story meant to be *representative* of new immigrant hopes and struggles? In what ways is her story unique, contrasting the protagonist’s reactions with those of others (such as her fellow factory workers)? How well do you think the story balances these two ways of characterizing the protagonist (as individual and as representative of a people)?

One of Yeziarska’s goals in her fiction was to get native Americans to be more questioning and critical about their beliefs. Native-born Americans tended to fall (then as now) into two groups: those who felt that immigrant “hordes” were a danger to the nation’s cultural and moral fabric, and those who complacently believed that because we’re a nation of immigrants our nation is basically “open” and welcoming to immigrants who work hard. Do you see evidence that this story seeks to challenge both these sets of beliefs?

Near the end of the story, a meeting with a sympathetic English teacher appears to break the narrator’s vicious cycle of hope and despair. Aside from the fact that English teachers are naturally brilliant and sympathetic, unlike sweat shop bosses [ ;-) ], I wonder whether the story really suggests that the protagonist’s emotional roller-coaster ride has ended. That is, the new reading the teacher gives the narrator is certainly important to her, but are there any hints that the English teacher is rather condescending, or that she’s not really thinking of the girl as an individual but as a type that she wants to “know”?

What’s the meaning of the story’s title?

If you’re intrigued and moved by the story’s most important quotation that so inspires the heroine, as I was, do some research and find out more about who Waldo Frank was and what he wrote.