



# Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## E PLURIBUS PLURUM

America still remains the land of opportunity for many throughout the world. At The Rockefeller University a high proportion of workers have come to this country from a foreign shore. To commemorate America's birthday, the 230th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, *Natural Selections* asked some RU foreign nationals about their experiences as immigrants and their opinions about America. Responses have been published anonymously to allow people to express their views candidly. Due to space constraints, we have not been able to print every response to every question. On our website <http://selections.rockefeller.edu> the complete set of responses may be viewed.

### A) Why did you decide to come to America?

Anonymous (Anon) #2: What's the best reason for moving? Love!

Anon #6: Great research environment, great researchers from all over the world, lots of information. Also to learn English.

Anon #7: To get a broader horizon and see the world from a different standpoint.

Anon #8: Came with my dad, but for my dad we came here because he wanted a better life for me.

Anon #9: I came here to get a better education, as I believed the American education system encouraged freedom of expression and true learning.

Anon #15: They give you a lot of opportunities. I came to America to finish my studies and to live the American Dream, nice house, education etc.

Anon #21: Because Rockefeller University was the best for me and my son, compared to offers in Germany and England.

Anon #22: Childhood memories play tricks on you. I came to America to find Joyce Davenport, a character from the show *Hill Street Blues* I fell in love with in the early eighties, while in Portugal. Back then, America was everywhere, and not only on TV. I had immigrant relatives living on the outskirts of Boston, and they shipped enormous cardboard packages with goodies to my grandparents.

The first time I saw the word "sex" printed was in the single and precious *Cosmopolitan* issue my grandmother got from her sister in America. I couldn't read yet, but the photos of Brooke Shields may have helped me figuring out what the text was about. They would also send me gifts, and by far my favorite was a Boston Red Sox T-shirt. I had no idea what Boston Red Sox meant, but I loved to put on that T-shirt to play, well, soccer. And then there was my uncle. He went from Lisbon to Texas to work as a plastic surgeon and came back metamorphosed into a cowboy: boots, hat, and leather jacket. It made quite an impression I have to say; my father wore a suit and tie everyday. Whereas most people come to America to get more money, move up in the social scale, or out of attraction for a country they admire and know, I moved here to relive my childhood. Joyce? Call me.

### B) What was your first impression of America? How did it match your expectations?

Anon #1: The horrible hallway of JFK upon landing in the US for the first time. Didn't I arrive in the richest nation on Earth? Once in the taxi, I was overwhelmed by the energy and enthusiasm of New Yorkers. The USA is a gigantic sweet and sour country, a land full of paradoxes.

Anon #2: During my first visit in the US, I experienced the blackout while I was desperately trying to reach the airport. What impressed me most was the positive attitude of the people in Manhattan. Everyone was partying in the street, trying to help each other. Can anything stop New Yorkers?

Anon #3: I stayed in San Diego for two months before coming to New York. At that time, I found everything was much bigger than in Japan. It was sort of what I had expected since stereotypical Americans like anything to be big.

Anon #4: I found ugly, huge cars everywhere

on the way from the airport. I still don't quite understand Americans' fascination with huge gas-guzzlers. I was also surprised when people ate during scientific talks and casually relaxed with their feet on the table. These things would never happen in India where science is

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

# AMERICA!

HALF-BROTHER OF THE WORLD! WITH  
SOMETHING GOOD AND BAD OF EVERY LAND.

— PHILIP JAMES BAILEY

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considered very formal.

New York City is quite different from the rest of the USA in terms of meeting my expectations. I found it vibrant, liberal, and multicultural where one can do anything one wants. In that respect it met and exceeded my expectations. I also spent a year at Cornell University in Ithaca. There I saw small-town America which is more family-oriented, religious, and traditional.

Anon #5: The first impression was good, but (referring to New York) I was expecting to find more integration of cultures. While I think it is multicultural, each culture remains on its own.

Anon #7: I came without expectations, to avoid major disappointments.

Anon #9: Clean, well-organized, considerably more liberal people than in my home country in terms of accepting differences or eccentricities. Now that I've been here for over 15 years, there are parts of the country and certain pockets of people that are ignorant, and as I've become more knowledgeable about politics etc. things aren't as well organized as they seem. But I still love being here—nowhere is perfect.

Anon #11: Generally met my expectations. I was horrified though by the level of maturity

*continued on next page*

expressed by college freshmen of privileged background and their general lackadaisical attitude toward foreigners. To this day, I honestly think they define the phrase “spoilt brats.”

Anon #13: I spent my first night at Newark Airport and I could see the Manhattan skyline; this was rather just as I had imagined it from pictures, if a bit less grandiose. The next morning I flew to the Midwest and that’s when I was surprised by America. I remember thinking that everything was so perfect: very broad roads, trees and flowers everywhere, square blocks, and perfectly aligned cloned houses with uniformly cut grass. It seemed like a movie set.

Anon #14: My first impression of America was positive. The first place I moved to was NY and I felt the people were outgoing and free. I say free because they had the freedom to say whatever they wanted to say. In Haiti, you criticize the government, you need to hide for your life.

Anon #19: I didn’t like it at first, I was in the Midwest and that part of the country seemed “fake friendly” and I felt like I did not belong there. I didn’t think that it would be so different from my home country, but it was. As soon as I moved to NYC things changed. I love it here!

Anon #20: As the first impression depends on the state/city visited, which in my case was California, I was surprised to see how much one is dependent on the car. I missed being able to walk without being asked if something is wrong. Also, I expected to see the giant food portions, but I didn’t know that these will also translate into an overemphasis of grandeur in everyday life, as everything has to be big and great.

Anon #22: I guess this boils down to my first impression of New York. It was like being on the set of a movie I had seen too many times. As the Pentagon would probably put it: “Shock and Familiarity.” This is, I guess, a common reaction, particularly amongst cinema fanatics. But there was something else, a bit disturbing. During the first hours in downtown Manhattan, I felt quite Lilliputian. For a moment, I thought someone would grab and lock me in a cage, like a hamster, to amuse their kids or impress their guests. There were those huge buildings, those huge portions in restaurants, huge limos, and huge, huge people.

As far as my expectations go, things didn’t start exactly as I had planned. I wanted to get to America with only \$10 in my pocket, because it would look good in my biography, and that’s how a real immigrant should enter a new country. Instead, I had a scholarship and real

estate investments. It felt like cheating. Anyway, given the salary of a postdoctoral associate and the cost of living in Manhattan, I may actually be able to leave the US with only \$10 in my pocket, which would be a nice twist.

### **C) What do you like most about America?**

Anon #4: The informal attitude to research, the ability to generate resources if the need arises.

Anon #5: In theory, one can do what one really likes. Also, you can reinvent yourself at almost any age.

Anon #7: You work hard, you succeed! And the beautiful landscape outside the city.

Anon #9: I think I’ve found my true home in NYC where it is a true melting pot for people of all races and backgrounds. While there is some element of social stratification, the expectations aren’t as high or rigid as they would be where I’m originally from.

Anon #10: Enthusiasm for new ideas, and individualism (in the good sense of the word).

Anon #11: I can be who I want to be and people are not quick to judge.

Anon #12: I like that meritocracy exists and it is possible to reach one’s goals as long as one works for it. This is not always the case where I come from.

Anon #13: Although not everyone can be in the tenth percentile, in America everyone has a reasonable chance of getting ahead. As importantly, due to the broad definition of what it means to be American, immigrants are truly integrated in society much faster than in any other country in the world.

Anon #14: The freedom of press, the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion.

Anon #17: What I like most is the fact that you can find anything you want here: clothes, food, any type of technology, ANYTHING... and you can usually find it at a good price from at least one place.

Anon #18: I love the people in my lab. They have made my start here go much better than I could have hoped for. Pork is really cheap here.

Anon #20: I like the directness of Americans in stating their point of view (especially in New York), and the conscientiousness in their work.

Anon #22: American TV and politics. American TV is so bad these days that I stopped watching it, ending a long lasting addiction. American TV got me hooked 30 years ago, and then it cured me. This is something the tobacco companies will never manage to do. It’s not that I like American TV. I just feel compelled to thank whoever put all those terrible shows on the air. Politics is a different matter. The US foreign policy is a bit tragic, but internally it’s just fascinating to see how people can be so

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**Jessica Baucom**

**Rudy Bellani**

**Allan Coop**

**Ileana Cristea**

**Ana Domingos**

**Paula Duque**

**Barbara Juncosa**

**Adria Le Boeuf**

**Aileen Marshall**

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passionate about civil liberties, their rights, a cause, any cause, including no cause at all. It can be ridiculous and entertaining (the constellation of conspirationists this country accommodates), annoying (creationists and intelligent designers), worrisome (Republicans dealing with science), exciting (media personalities, particularly radio hosts), and convincing on universal and urgent problems (Gore’s slide show on Global Warming, just to give a recent example). This is probably the result of having a mature democracy in a mature multicultural society. My contribution is modest but hopefully engaging: a moratorium on the by default habit of putting ice cubes in our glasses of water. It doesn’t quite match what the Founding Fathers did, but it’s a start.

### **D) What do you dislike most about about America?**

Anon #2: The lack of consciousness about energy saving, from air conditioners to plastic bags. How would the world end up if every nation behaved in the same way? The world would be a big garbage [dump].

Anon #3: I realized that what foreigners love to hate about America wasn’t necessarily based on facts. As far as New York is concerned, the bad manners of drivers here annoys me the most.

Anon #4: Every place essentially looks the same in America, except for the weather. I don’t like big American corporate chain stores that spread all over the US and the

world stifling local ingenuity.

Anon #5: People are friendly but not friends. Most of them think only about what they want to do in their careers without thinking they live with other people. Also, I think people are not so willing to accept other cultures. They can stand them, but not accept them.

Anon #6: Danger (guns, robbers etc.) or drugs.

Anon #7: You work hard, you succeed, but if you get sick on the way, bad luck. Uptight and conservative people. The mixture of politics with religion.

Anon #10: The focus on money.

Anon #13: America does not know how to relax. It seems that the joy of just sitting around or being with others (not in a club) has been lost. Americans think that relaxation can only be had during vacations, and that it is proportional to the money spent.

Anon #14: Racism.

Anon #16: It is now much more difficult to go home and then be able to come back to America without any problems.

Anon #17: The politics. Let's not get into it...

Anon #18: I struggled for quite a while to make a decent cup of tea, didn't like that much. America is very conservative; I often find it hard to understand.

Anon #20: The power of religion in manipulating people's decisions in everyday life and in creating excuses for sending someone to die in an unjustifiable war. Also, the fact that the governmental income obtained from regular people is not invested back in improving the security and dignity of their lives.

Anon #21: The old moral standards, double moral standards, abortion of wanted pregnancies, racism against blacks, the killing in the name of democracy, suing for everything.

Anon #22: Americans can be slightly autistic or self-centered. This is a characteristic of all cultures, but it gets exacerbated here due to the economic, military, and cultural power of America. Interestingly, there is also a minority of Americans who are obsessed with foreign cultures, but they go overboard in their enthusiasm about what's exotic. It's just the other side of the same problem. Not having to learn a second language, not having a foreign cultural superpower to complement your own culture without any major effort from you, all this must have some consequences. It's very hard to find an American with a balanced view of the world.

#### **E) What do you miss most about your home country?**

Anon #1: Quality of life and modesty. Human scale of most cities. Existence of a free social assistance service for all.

Anon #6: Food!!! Natto...

Anon #8: Relatives, food, my childhood

where I used to be innocent.

Anon #12: I really miss my family, as I don't get to share my life with them on a regular basis. I also miss the fact that everyone is friendlier and strangers will lend a helping hand without being asked.

Anon #14: Ability to live in a big house with lots of land. Family. The ability to see the reflection of yourself everywhere you go.

Anon #15: The ability to create a network of friends, everyone is busy in this fast paced country.

Anon #17: I miss the feeling of being completely comfortable and that feeling of knowing where everything is. While I have been here for some time, there are times when I feel like a tourist.

Anon #18: I miss my family and friends of course. I miss the weather, my local pub, some food, especially meat pies and some candy we have, and I miss people being able to understand my slang.

Anon #19: My family, friends, food, and the slower pace!

Anon #21: My family, and the Mediterranean climate.

#### **F) How do you think being in America has changed you as a person? Do you feel American?**

Anon #1: I am, and shall remain, European. Although I have a lot of admiration for the US, my stay in America has just reinforced my European nature. I belong to Europe in many ways. However, America has deeply changed my state of mind in showing me that nothing is impossible if some human beings share a common dream.

Anon #3: Being in the US has certainly influenced me. It is associated with so many changes in my life. However, I'm not sure if it was being in the US or something else that changed me the most. Although I can't see myself a part of the American society, you can carry an American passport while considering yourself as a national of some other country. That flexibility is probably what America is about.

Anon #5: Being here made me grow up...but I cannot say I feel American. In addition, I don't think there are characteristics common to every American.

Anon #8: I definitely do for the most part, and I definitely believe that I would be a totally different person if I hadn't come here. At the same time I try to preserve my native

heritage as much as possible.

Anon #11: Yes, in many ways I do. I really do admire Americans (my experience has been exclusively East Coast) for giving one the benefit of the doubt and for not nurturing preconceived opinions about anything. They also leave you alone pretty much. The sense that I can achieve whatever I put my mind to is unique. I am, in many ways, already living the American Dream.

Anon #12: I have always been a very independent person, but living here particularly



#### ***It's another day living the American Dream***

during my adolescence has made me stand on my two feet even firmer. I don't quite feel American, but I feel that I belong here especially in New York. I don't think it is really possible to integrate as well and as easily in many other places.

Anon #13: Coming from a homogeneous country, the largest impact of living in America has resulted from its diversity. I feel closer to other people, if only because I have visual confirmation that they exist and are just like "us." Also, living in the most powerful country in the world makes you feel more responsible for what happens around the globe. I am afraid I came into this country too old to be indoctrinated with the American spirit.

Anon #16: I realize how important my family is to me. Absence does make the heart grow fonder. Yes, most of the time (when I am not traveling outside of America) I feel like an American. I look around me and I see someone from every country that I can imagine.

Anon #17: I think that being in America has made me more open. You can be a little more vocal here with your opinions and it is OK. I

*continued on page 12*



## ESTHER WU

**Day 2**—The car is fixed! B packs and says his good-byes. We get supplies for the trip

In the evening, we arrive in Las Vegas, Nevada, home to ersatz Paris, Venice, New York City, Camelot, Hollywood, Ancient Rome, Egypt, and a vague, non-threatening version of the Middle

A black and white photograph showing the massive stone arches of the suspension bridge. The bridge deck is visible in the foreground, and the suspension cables are seen on either side. In the background, city buildings are visible through the arches.

of the West has in fact been shaped by this one spot." The valley is full of the craggy sandstone buttes made iconic by countless Westerns. Picture John Wayne or Clint Eastwood riding astride a palomino or shooting a Colt from behind a red rock.

Verde is a lush, green place compared to the dryness we've experienced the past few days. The air is still dry and the sun still very hot, but since we are past the Rockies, it's much more temperate.

Let me take this moment to extol the virtues of our National Parks system, which celebrates its centenary this year (Theodore Roosevelt established the Antiquities Act in 1906). There are nearly 400 national parks or monuments in the system, each preserving its own piece of our national heritage. Instead of Roman baths and medieval cathedrals, America has majestic purple (and every other color depending on the time of day) mountains, spacious skies, and fruited plains. Being a city-dweller, it's easy to

East—the quintessence of American consumerism and diversity. It is perhaps the only city in the US where you can find a representative sampling of every kind of American, a throwing-up of democracy. Vegas is essentially a Disney World for adults, a place out in the desert set aside for nothing but indulgence and pleasure; everyone's agenda is to have fun. The city is an unironic pastiche of stereotypical cultures with the Eiffel Tower, Coliseum, Grand Canal, Statue of Liberty, an Egyptian pyramid and much more all within walking distance of each other. The Bellagio's buffet is fantastic: implausible variety and everything actually tastes good. We spend about 24 hours in Vegas, four of them sleeping...uh...nothing to report.

and head off at sunset. We stop for dinner at Harris Ranch, along the I-5. Ugh. Smells like a real ranch! We hurry inside the restaurant as fast as possible and feast on meat, like Men. We are talky and excited, hopeful.

The low (down to 280 feet below sea level) valley surrounded by mountains, in the high desert, Death Valley creates a perfect storm of heat. There is no moisture and no shade. Today it reaches 115°F in the shade. It strikes me that Death Valley is an American landscape: a vast flat of rugged terrain against a moun-

**Mesa Verde National Park: this Juniper Pinion and thousands like it died in the fires of 1996 and 2000.**

★ ★

INTELLECTUALLY I KNOW THAT AMERICA IS NO BETTER THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY; EMOTIONALLY

**Day 6**—Mostly driving today. We see flat ranchland and no looming mountains for the first time. We stop for a Mexican lunch at Lena's Cafe in lonely Tucumcari, New Mexico. It's a local, family-run restaurant adorned with murals showing the whole of Lena's family. Yummy enchiladas smothered in either red or green chile. We drive the rest of the day towards Texas. We see Cadillac Ranch, a classic roadside attraction: ten Cadillacs upended and half-buried in the middle of an empty field. The cars are covered with a thick layer of graffiti, spray painted by decades of passersby.

While the house is indulgently decorated, it's excess on a human scale. The house

**Cadillac Ranch: a spray painted roadside oddity.**



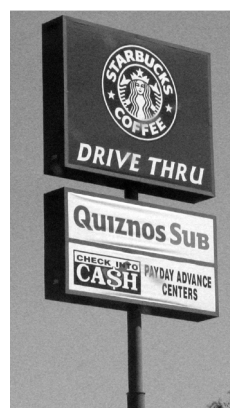
The red buttes of Monument Valley are featured in many films including *The Searchers*, *The Eiger Sanction*, and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.



**One of Elvis's many glittering jumpsuits on display at Graceland in Memphis, TN.**

**Day 7**—Going through Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas we pass through familiar interstate-close towns homogenized by Starbucks, Wal-Mart, and the like. We reach Memphis, Tennessee. Gleefully, we head for Graceland, an attraction infamous for its tackiness. On the off chance you don't know, Graceland was Elvis Presley's home from 1957 to his death in 1977. We tour the house, luxuriously decorated in high-seventies kitsch: shag carpeted ceilings, waterfalls, velvet upholstery, mirrored ceilings. Elvis's planes rest in a faux airport complete with boarding gate and "Elvis Fan Detector." The "airport" is a site of perfect

Like so much of the US, Graceland is utterly without irony, a foreign concept to a couple of snarky East Coasters like B and me.



Yes, it's drive thru Starbucks.

set over the Mississippi River. It wasn't even that the stars were innumerable and bright. It was in fact the guilelessness at the heart of everything we'd seen that won me over. It made me realize the disconnect between my own nature and the people who created these earnest monuments, parks, and sites. I may be a sarcastic New Yorker, but it gladdens me to see that America still wears its heart on its sleeve. ☺

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,  
Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me leading wherever  
I choose.*

—“Song of the Open Road” by Walt Whitman

I KNOW SHE IS BETTER THAN EVERY OTHER COUNTRY. — SINCLAIR LEWIS



## ILEANA M. CRISTEA

A small overview of the Hudson Valley treasures can appropriately be started with the Rockefeller Estate, completed in 1913 for the founder of our university, John D. Rockefeller. The Rockefeller Estate (Kykuit, “lookout” in Old Dutch), located on the Pocantico Hills of Sleepy Hollow, was the country home to four generations of the Rockefeller family. Donated by Governor Rockefeller in 1979 to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the estate is open to tourists from April to early November. The estate, featuring a neoclassical revival style villa and gardens designed by architect William Welles Bosworth, is a nice treat not only for history lovers, but also for art aficionados due to its extensive collection of sculptures, paintings, and antiques. In addition to the classic art collections, an unusual highlight of the underground art gallery is the series of tapestries commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller based on his favorite paintings by Picasso. Although not quite Picasso, the tapestries were woven under the artist’s supervision.

*in Space.* The Rockefeller garden is considered the greatest American accomplishment of Bosworth, who also supervised the restoration of the palaces of Versailles and Fontainebleau and the cathedrals at Rheims and Chartres (projects all funded in large part by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.).

A visit to the estate also includes a tour of the coach barn, which houses a collection of classic automobiles and horse-drawn carriages. A warm spring or summer day is most suited for visiting the Rockefeller Estate, as it can get windy during the garden viewing. Tours start at Philipsburg



## The villa at Kykuit

Manor, from where a shuttle bus takes visitors to the estate. Purchasing tickets<sup>1</sup> in advance might be a good idea, as weekends can sell out.

### Brâncuși's *Bird in Space*

and the mixture of objects from Irving's numerous international travels unfold a tangible biography of the author. In collaboration with his neighbor, artist George Harvey, Irving designed Sunnyside and its surrounding grounds to reflect his romantic view of art, nature, and history. Garden paths, trees, shrubs, and water features are arranged to appear natural and an exotic wisteria vine envelopes the house. The house and grounds were restored by Historic Hudson Valley to look as they did in 1850s, and opened to the public as a historic site in 1947. Since Sunnyside was the home of Irving descendants until the twentieth century, the house still displays original furnishings. Guides in Victorian dresses give tours of the house and host events throughout the year, such as celebrating Independence Day and organizing day camps and food festivals<sup>3</sup>.

Also located in Tarrytown is Lyndhurst, which although sometimes called Lyndhurst Castle is really a Gothic Revival mansion. Designed in 1838 by Alexander Jackson Davis for William Paulding (a former mayor of NYC), the villa underwent major transformations as it passed between owners of various statures (businessman George Merritt and railroad magnate Jay Gould). In 1961, the estate passed to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Although it gave me an impression of bought taste and mixed styles, the mansion provides an image of the evolution of fashion of the American high-class society during those years. A walk in the extensive grounds surrounding Lyndhurst is worthwhile, offering beautiful views of the Hudson River.

A real treasure of the Hudson Valley is the Union Church of Pocantico Hills. The simple stone country church appearance hides remarkable examples of modern stained glass art: nine windows painted by Marc Chagall, and the last work of Henri Matisse, the *Rose Window*, completed in design just two days before his death. While still housing an active congregation, the Union Church is now owned by Historic Hudson Valley and open to tourists<sup>4</sup>.

Although our guide for that day insisted

## AILEEN MARSHALL

Taking Irving's advice from his words in the beginning of *Tales of a Traveller*, "If the tales I have furnished should prove to be bad, they will at least be found short; so that no one will be wearied long on the same theme," I draw to a close this small overview of some American historic sites in the Hudson Valley. ☉

One traditional event on the Fourth of July is Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest. The 91st annual gastronomic competition, with 20 international finalists, begins at 11:30 a.m. at the corner of Stillwell and Surf Avenues in Coney Island, Brooklyn. See if five-time champion Takeru Kobayashi, from Japan, can beat his record of 53 and half hot dogs. The Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, at 46th Street and 12th Avenue will be starting a new exhibition, *Heroic Journeys: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Stories*, starting at 11:00 a.m. Roosevelt Island has a Family Festival. For \$18, you can enjoy food by Brother Jimmy's BBQ, or bring your own. This no-alcohol event, starting at 5:00 p.m., also has activities for the kids, and live bands. Then watch the fireworks from the southern tip of the island. Tickets can be purchased at <http://www.rioc.com/> or at the festival entrance. Other local celebrations are held in Chinatown, Battery Park, and Fulton Street. On July 5 and 6, The New York Philharmonic has annual Independence week concerts—Rhapsody in Red, White, and Blue—with compositions by Gershwin, Copland, Bernstein, and others. Tickets range from \$19 to \$49 and can be purchased at Avery Fisher Hall. ◎

1. <http://www.hudsonvalley.org/kykuit/index.htm>
2. *Tales of a Traveller*, Washington Irving.
3. <http://www.hudsonvalley.org/sunnyside/index.htm>
4. <http://www.hudsonvalley.org/unionchurch/index.htm>
5. [http://www.hudsonvalley.org/unionchurch/learn\\_windows.htm](http://www.hudsonvalley.org/unionchurch/learn_windows.htm)

7

## KENTA ASAHINA

Intriguing enough is its title. Kafka had never visited America; as a matter of fact, he seldom left Prague, his hometown. Presumably, therefore, he liked to let the hero, Karl Rosmann, freely explore the rather imaginary world called America. That was what Karl needed. His parents forced him to leave following his scandal with a maid. Where else could he start his new life? In the early 20th century, America was still somehow a mysterious land to Europeans, with a mixed image of liberty and danger, dreamers and exiles.

However, Karl's fate begins to be doomed. He is suddenly fired from the hotel where he found a job as a lift boy. The chief cook and her secretary, who have been his friends and guardians in the hotel, try to save him, only in vain. Here all the mishaps attack Karl. Through an unjust and incomprehensible sequence of events, he is beaten up, stripped of all his possessions, and somehow ends up becoming a servant of Delamarche, who managed to seduce Brunelda, a rich woman, and became her lover. Chased by the police, Karl has no choice but to work under abusive Delamarche and unbalanced Brunelda. You may see the nature of Kafka coming back. The peculiar sensation assures you, 'Yes, it is surely Kafka's work.' Devastating absurdity always traps his heroes.

Just as other Kafka's novels, *Amerika* is incomplete. Although reconstructing what he originally intended to write is a challenging task, Kafka clearly wanted to conclude *Amerika* with a happy ending. The edition I read contains one of the fragments in which Karl starts a new career in the Theater of Oklahoma. Everything looks hopeful and secured. The image of the bright opening seems to recur as Karl mysteriously comes out of his misery.

What did Kafka try to say? What did “happiness” mean to him? What makes Kafkaesque absurdity special is its realism. Even in his short stories, Kafka masterfully weaved utter irrationality into the raw lives of humans. It is as if you saw a nightmare awake. The fear and solitude he conveys are undoubtedly real, while the reason why they are real is nowhere to be found. Perhaps he once wished that life could be different. Perhaps he wished that the “happiness” could be palpable. *Amerika* could have been a crystal of his hope to realize what he adored the most but obtained the least. Sadly, he also knew that he was unsuitable for the job. The fragment of the original ending floats like the heavens, detached from the real life in which Karl has been trapped. Kafka was a missionary of modern loneliness. His novels resonate with what Kierkegaard or Camus tried to tell in their books. Thus, it is quite understandable that he failed to build a staircase leading the reality to the happiness in *Amerika*. His works collectively assert that happiness is forever in the heavens: it’s inaccessible.

Amerika (The Man Who Disappeared)  
by Franz Kafka, translated by Michael Hofmann, 1996, New Direction Paperback, ISBN 0-8112-1569-5

## MARY ABRAHAM

*There are worse crimes than burning books.  
One of them is not reading them.*  
—Joseph Brodsky

How can one, especially a foreigner, ever hope to know or understand America? A good place to start is on the written page. What could be included in an America 101 reading list? Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, written by a Frenchman who came to America in 1831, has been frequently called the most perceptive non-fiction book ever written about American society. If you would like to try the Great American Novel, some good authors to investigate include Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, J.D. Salinger, Harper Lee, Don DeLillo, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton. If it's poetry you're after, try starting with Robert Frost. And for an introduction to American humor, how about James Thurber or Mark Twain?

If you already have some grounding in the basics and would like some advanced reading suggestions, below is a list of books about America kindly provided to *Natural Selections* by Toby Cox, the owner of the bookstore Three Lives & Company.

*A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley—a reworking of King Lear set on an Iowa farm.

*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Raymond Carver—the down-trodden and overlooked in America.

*Shadows on the Hudson* by Isaac Bashevis Singer—post-War Jewish immigrants in New York.

*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen—devastating family portrait in late 20th century America.

*Fury* by Salman Rushdie—a recent immigrant's view of New York City in the year 2000.

*Another Country* by James Baldwin—African American twenty something in Bohemian NYC in the 1950s.

*Light Years* by James Salter—1970s collapse of an American suburban family.

*The Known World* by Edward P. Jones—slavery in a Southern plantation in 1859.

IN THE UNITED STATES, THERE ONE FEELS FREE... EXCEPT FROM THE AMERICANS



*Empire Falls* by Richard Russo—working class New England, after the mills have closed down.

*A Way of Life, Like Any Other* by Darcy O'Brien—Hollywood childhood of the son of B-actor parents. ☺

*If you are in the West Village, a visit to Three Lives*

## Are you an American Citizen?

**1. What is the most important right you enjoy as an American citizen?**

- (a) Right to vote in presidential elections.
- (b) Right to vote for the American Idol.
- (c) Right to bear arms.
- (d) Right to bare arms.

## 2. What is meant by “free speech”?

- (a) Anything you say is worthless.
- (b) Cell phone companies offering free night and weekend minutes.
- (c) Your phone calls can be recorded for quality assurance purposes, and for other reasons by the NSA.

**3. Who becomes president of the United States if both the president and the vice-president die?**

- (a) Arnold Schwarzenegger.  
(b) The speaker of the House of Representatives.  
(c) The losing candidate in the previous election.  
(d) Britney Spears. Did you know she is expecting again?

**4. Your boss asks you to do some pinch hitting at a conference. Do you say:**

- (a) “Sure, no problem.”  
(b) “I draw the line at physical violence against our competitors.”

**5. What can you see by the dawn's early light?**

- A mall about to open on the day after Thanksgiving.
- Our flag.
- It's time to finish work, go home and get some sleep.

### 6. What is likely to be the next amendment to the Constitution?

- (a) Fox News is the only news channel allowed to broadcast.
- (b) The death penalty is prohibited.
- (c) Marriage is restricted to being between a man and a woman.
- (d) All presidential candidates must take an IQ test.

**7. Which of the following was responsible for the end of the Cold War?**

- (a) Flu Vaccine.  
(b) Global Warming.  
(c) Operation Desert Storm.  
(d) Collapse of the Soviet Union.

### 8. In winter should you:

- (a) Wear warmer clothing.

- (b) Turn up the heating to remind you summer is coming.
- (c) Turn on the air conditioner if your heating is turned up too much.

### 9. What is a good way to start a conversation?

- “Did you hear the joke about Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed trying to catch a cab?”
- “Do you think Hillary will become president in 2008?”
- “Did you hear Britney is expecting again?”

**10. What are the three branches of the US government?**

- (a) Left Wing, Right Wing, and the Center.
- (b) General Assembly, World Bank, and Security Council.
- (c) FBI, CIA, and NSA.
- (d) Legislative, Executive, and Judiciary.
- (e) Brad, Angelina, Shiloh.

**11. Which recent historical event has had a profound effect on the American psyche?**

- (a) The September 11 terrorist attacks.
- (b) The Boston Red Sox winning the World Series after 86 years.
- (c) The Chicago White Sox winning the World Series after 87 years.
- (d) Wardrobe malfunction during the 2004 Superbowl.

**12. What is the national anthem of the United States?**

- (a) I'm Lovin' It.
- (b) The Star Spangled Banner.
- (c) Let's Go Yankees!
- (d) U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!

### 13. What do you think about universal health care?

- (a) A good idea.  
(b) No thanks, comrade.

**14. Can you ever own too many electronic appliances?**

- (a) Yes  
(b) No

### 15. What is the American Dream?

- (a) Gasoline should cost less than water.
- (b) Sorry, I always take two Ambien tablets and don't remember my dreams.
- (c) 0% APR.
- (d) Enforced global freedom

[illegible]

- BUT EVERY PEARL HAS ITS OYSTER - RANDALL JARRELL

## ***We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* by Bruce Springsteen**

The best music often happens at the crossroads, at the “dangerous edge of things.” America, the most immigrant of nations, is particularly lucky therefore to be situated at a musical crossroads through which travelers have passed from every corner of the globe. Robert Johnston, the renowned American blues player from the 1930s made music that was so astonishing, the legend was he had gone to a crossroads at midnight and sold his soul to the devil. Today if we chance upon the American musical crossroads at midnight, the unlikely figure lurking mischievously in the darkness is Bruce Springsteen, the eponymous “future of rock ‘n roll.” Mr. Springsteen has just taken a rather unexpected turn in the road and been reborn as a folk musician, recently releasing the album *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* and completing a live tour of the music across Europe and America.

The musician Peter Seeger played a critical role in the blossoming 1960s New York folk music scene, reviving and popularizing some classics including the song “We

This glorious circus of an album provides many delights. Springsteen is a magnificent singer, and his voice has the perfect character for these folk songs—it isn't smooth, but has a rumpled, flinty charm. It is the voice of someone who has lived life at the deep end. If you are singing about the harsh realities of the world, the voice's imperfections perfect the music. The CD comes with a short DVD on the making of the album. In it, as the musicians are sitting around at the recording session, the host Springsteen offers beers, informing the vocalists they need a "wild sound, a beer-drunk, whiskey-drinking sound." At this point any remaining skepticism vanishes. The man in charge knows exactly what he is doing. Folk music frequently suffers from an uncool reputation for being boring, or lacking passion. For folk music to live it needs some fire and to be played with co-operative rowdy abandon. And what makes this album so irresistible is the overflowing, enveloping vitality of the sound.

erywhere, and "Erie Canal" is a tender little song on the ebb and flow of daily work as man and mule haul coal and hay on the up-state New York waterways. Some songs of troubles past have obvious resonances with troubles present. "My Oklahoma Home" concerns the mass migration following the American Dust Bowl calamity of the 1930s. "Mrs. McGrath," which originated in Ireland in 1815, is about a son returning from an overseas war in which he has lost both his legs. As the lyrics put it, "All foreign wars I do proclaim live on blood and a mother's pain." The remaining songs on the album, including "We Shall Overcome" and a spine-tingling version of "Eyes on the Prize," can be grouped together as songs of struggle. Many of them were particularly associated with the music of the Civil Rights era and such songs often originated from African American spirituals. This album reinforces how essential the contribution of the African American musical tradition has been to the overall development of American music.

For more information and to hear some tracks visit:  
[www.brucespringsteen.net](http://www.brucespringsteen.net)



*This month, Natural Selections features Christopher Woodrell, Lab Manager and Assistant to Dr. Werner, Laboratory of Molecular Biophysics  
Country of Origin: USA*

**5. What do you miss most when you are out of town?** When I leave town I always miss the nocturnal parts of city life. I don't think New Yorkers are insomniacs, but there's a critical mass so that something is always happening. It might sound cliché, but it's true.

**10. Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? Why?** As to whether I consider myself a New Yorker, it's relative: if I'm with a group of lifelong New Yorkers, then I'm a Californian. If I'm in California, then I'm a New Yorker. ☺



cartoon by Sean Taverna

\* \* \* \* \*

WHAT TOGETHER WE CAN DO FOR THE FREEDOM OF MAN. — JOHN F. KENNEDY



# Update from the *Copa Mundial* 2006

KEVIN O'DONOVAN

After 19 consecutive days of at least two games or more, we've arrived at the quarterfinals of the 2006 World Cup. By the time you read this it may well be time for the World Cup Final. To begin though, let's see how my first round predictions went. I got things right for the most part though Ecuador, Ghana, and Argentina tripped me up. Ecuador proved they could win at sea level; Ghana showed they were world class when they rebounded strongly against the Czechs; and Argentina, well, they proved it's all about *ganar, golear, y gustar*. My bold prediction was that the Ivory Coast would progress and while they showed they could compete with the likes of the Argentines and Dutch, they could only manage a victory against the already eliminated Serbia and Montenegro.

I was fortunate enough to have been able to attend three matches in Germany. The Sweden v. Paraguay match in Berlin's renovated Olympic Stadium was a sight to behold with upwards of 60,000 yellow-clad and partying Swedes who rejoiced into the wee hours following Ljungberg's injury time winner. The Paraguayans were buoyed by their enthusiastic though severely outnumbered supporters.

Next up, it was USA v. Italy at the Fritz Walter Stadium in Kaiserslautern where the atmosphere was electric. K-town, as Kaiserslautern is known to US military personnel, and its surroundings are populated by more than 30,000



An enthusiastic US supporter before the USA v. Ghana match

Americans as the massive Ramstein Air Base is nearby. As such, the American presence was strong at the match and helped the US earn a valuable point while playing with sheer grit and determination against a tentative Italian side. That said, heart alone is not enough if you want success on the soccer pitch, and the US lads will have to, as we say over here, raise their game if they want to compete for a trophy in future World Cups.

Finally, on to Nürnberg where sentimental favorites Ghana received generous support from the locals in their 2-1 victory against the US.

An enterprising lab at RU has seamlessly integrated soccer and science, projecting games on the wall above a hood.



Unlike the US v. Italy match where I was seated amongst thousands of Americans, in Nürnberg, I found myself in a "neutral" section made up of mostly Germans who opted to support Ghana.

Before I sold the pair for a modest profit to an Englishman, I also had tickets to the 2nd round England v. Ecuador match in Stuttgart. In the months leading up to the tournament, ticket brokers and people like myself did a furious business selling tickets. For those of you who may be curious, some friends who were using scalpers (buying tickets from ticket brokers at the stadiums on the day of the game) on their way across Germany routinely paid from €200–€500 for first round tickets on game day. Most of the tickets were printed with the original buyer's name, and this information along with each person's nationality and passport number were digitally encoded into each ticket. The rules were very clear that at each venue everyone would have to match their identity to the tickets in order to gain entry into the stadium. However, the only thing they were concerned about at the stadiums was safety. Everyone and all bags were thoroughly searched and throughout my entire stay in Germany, I observed no fan violence. And I must add that save the sweaty rides on the jam-packed S-Bahn to and from the games,

the matches were an absolute delight.

So I'll go out on a limb here and see how my prediction holds up. Finally, it will be the Klinsmann led Germans who win it all. A Huntington Beach, California resident now, Klinsi played football with an infectious exuberance and he has brought this energy to a German squad that usually is lacking in this regard. His attack-minded strategy takes shape with a core of creative players who feed the Polish-born strikers Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski. Indeed, the duo have scored seven goals in four games and if they continue at this rate the German captain Ballack will surely hoist the Cup on July 9. ☉

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*'E Pluribus Plurum'* continued from page 3

like that. Many times I don't feel like an American; but the longer I stay here the more I feel like an American.

Anon #18: I don't think I have changed much at all. I definitely don't feel American, if anything I feel more Australian. I appreciate more the idiosyncrasies of Australia after having lived away from there for a while.

Anon #19: I think that you are lucky if you can learn more about other cultures. In America, you can have influences from many other nations besides America. That certainly is an amazing experience. I believe that it has made me more open-minded and richer. I do feel American sometimes, in New York everyone does.

Anon #21: I have always been an American: South America is also part of America. Or has North America or the US some royalty over the continent's name? I have learned a lot about other cultures thanks to NY, and I am a much stronger person after the experience of surviving alone with my son in this city.

Anon #22: "Don't ask how America has changed me, ask how I can change America." This has to resonate like a pure American way of thinking, but I sound fake, thus answering your second question. So far, I see no investment from America or me in nurturing this relationship. I experience the same with girls, but for a change I won't complain when America turns me down for good. A home country is not like a former girlfriend, and going back is not necessarily embarrassing or a route for disaster. I'm actually well buffered from a complete American influence. My close circle is still a melting pot of globetrotters, foreigners just like me. I do have a few American friends, but there is only one I send letters to on a regular basis—the IRS. ☉

## DESIGNER WANTED

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