

Author: Naomi Lindstrom

Session: How to Integrate the Jewish Experience in Latin America into Jewish Studies Courses

An Argentine-Jewish Novel in a Cross-Listed Course

These observations concern the challenges of reading and discussing in class *The Book of Memories* by Ana María Shua, an Argentine novel first published in 1994 that follows three generations of a Jewish family and its in-laws.

In my case, the special twist to teaching this book is the need to address simultaneously the various academic subcultures represented by the students in the class. At my university (University of Texas at Austin), unless a course is required in a degree plan, cross-listings are often essential to make sure that there is a healthy enrollment. One course might have different numbers for four different programs; besides, we seek out students through such means as the Hillel newsletter and various listservs. These cross-listings and recruitment efforts bring into the same classroom dissimilar student populations. These include Jewish Studies majors (not all of whom are Jewish), students from the university-wide honors program, offspring of Latin American parents as well as students from U.S. Latino backgrounds, members of Jewish fraternities and sororities, and evangelical Christians. Usually there are some students majoring in Latin American Studies; they tend to be preoccupied with politics, human rights, and questions of social justice. The problem becomes how to establish a common frame of reference that will allow these unlike constituencies to participate in a collective discussion of the novel.

When we read *The Book of Memories*, everyone who has read the assignments understands the family feuds, rivalries, power struggles, and outbreaks of resentment that move along the plot. Every student has lived in a family, providing a common denominator. They can

also grasp the story of a new immigrant to the Americas, especially since we have read many such narratives in class.

The young Latinamericanists in the class, with their focus on history, social ethics and justice, persistently favor two particular chapters that appear late in the novel, one an idiosyncratic account of the dirty war and the desaparecidos, and the other the story of a third-generation member of the family who became involved in a guerrilla army in mid-1970s Argentina. Some of the other students, though, find Argentine political history in the novel dizzyingly complex and inquire anxiously whether they will have to learn it for the exam.

The Jewish thematic material in the novel is not so easy for the students to recognize, whether or not they are Jewish. One semester in particular, the early chapter in which the Rimetka family officially and abruptly abandons Yiddish was understood, but as the novel went on, the students only sometimes perceived the Jewish allusions in the novel. A number of them obstinately believed that La Turca Bruta, a daughter-in-law of whom the Rimetkas speak of with crude disdain, was a Catholic woman, even though it had been explained in class more than once that “turca” in this case meant “Sephardic.” Students apparently felt that, to provoke such an unwelcoming response from the family, La Turca Bruta must surely represent another, potentially competing, religion. Finally a student observed in class that the Rimetkas were so intolerant that they despised everyone who was different from them in any way, an explanation that seemed to satisfy everyone, including me.

Some of the students in the course over the years have been quite a bit more observant than the average college student, perhaps not so much the Jewish students as the evangelical Christians who register for JS courses and sometimes become JS majors. Students with a

fundamentally religious outlook are at times puzzled by narratives, like *The Book of Memories*, featuring Jewish families that have become secularized. These students, who define themselves so greatly by their religiosity, may expect that a text assigned for a course on Jewish writing would include scenes of the characters observing holidays and Shabbat and learning Torah. It can be a struggle for them to grasp the idea of a character being “culturally Jewish.” Their more worldly contemporaries, whether Jewish or not, have little trouble grasping the concept of secular Jewish characters. The presence of evangelical Christians in a class on secular literature always presents the instructor with surprises, and never more so than when it is a JS class.

For me as instructor, the main challenge in addressing these diverse subgroups is to keep in mind that some of them need extra information to follow what is going on in the readings. The non-Jewish students often need basic terms like shtetl explained. While the more politically-aware students may already know a considerable amount about the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, most college-age people need the background filled in. If there are a number of students in the class who are knowledgeable in any one area, I need to make a persistent effort to remember the other groups of students who need more background to follow the discussion.