

Effective Techniques for Teaching About Other Cultures
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Families in a Global Context: Film and Fiction in a Family Law Course
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When I began teaching comparative and international Family Law, I began to consider how to help my students imagine and connect across cultures and legal systems to people and families whose worlds are both similar and very different. Short fiction and films have been a useful way to help my students build a richer understanding of the many different ways in which marriage, parenthood, and generational ties are constructed and experienced around the globe. During the course of my seminar on “Family Law in the World Community,” I assign a number of short stories as background reading, and we watch several films together. The quest for new material now shapes my own reading and viewing habits, and pulls me into book shops wherever I travel. On a recent trip to The Hague, I stumbled on a wonderful novel by the Dutch writer, Karel van Loon, called A Father’s Affair (2003). The last time I was in Montreal, I found Le parlement conjugal: une histoire de polygamie by Paulina Chiziane of Mozambique (2006) (conveniently translated from Portuguese into French). Even when my discoveries are not useful as course assignments, they spark new questions and enrich my own understanding of the subjects I teach.

In choosing what to assign to my students, I look for works written by authors who are insiders, whose imagination and art is grounded in a real experience of time, place, and culture. I choose stories that are contemporary rather than historical, and I look for both male and female voices. My goal is to take what may seem foreign at first encounter and make it more familiar

and imaginable. Because I am a law professor, my purpose in a classroom discussion is not to undertake a literary critique of the story or film I have assigned. Rather, I want to know what my students learned from their viewing or reading, what questions it provoked, and how it connected with the more traditional legal materials they are also reading or researching.

Marriage

Marriage traditions are often our starting point in the course, and a source of plentiful material in literature and film. We talk about the distinction between arranged and forced marriages, and I assign a chapter from Pearl Abraham's novel The Romance Reader (1995) in which a young Orthodox Jewish woman in New York is introduced to a young man her parents have identified as a potential husband. The chapter pairs nicely with a story by Peter Orner called "Providence" from Esther Stories (2001) about a young couple heading secretly to Rhode Island to get married. Beyond the stories assigned for class, I suggest possibilities for additional reading. For example, different marriage traditions are important to novels by the Nigerian-born writer Buchi Emecheta, including The Bride Price (1976) and The Joys of Motherhood (1979).

Polygamy is deeply foreign to most law students in the United States, except perhaps for the television version in the recent HBO series Big Love. I recommend novels such as Ama Ata Aidoo's very funny Changes: A Love Story (1991), which centers on several modern, independent career women living in Accra, Ghana. Esi, one of the women, separates from her husband and eventually becomes the second wife of another man, exchanging one set of problems for another. Students may read the classic short novel by Mariama Bâ of Senegal, Une Si Longue Lettre (1980) (available in English as "So Long a Letter") in which Ramatoulaye narrates the story of her marriage and her struggles after her husband chooses to take a much younger second wife. Polygamy stands in the background of Faïza Guène's Kiffe Kiffe Demain

(2004), in which a teenage girl in the housing projects of Paris narrates her story, noting at the beginning: “I guess I’ve been like this since my dad left. He went a long way away, back to Morocco to marry another woman, who must be younger and more fertile than my mom.” (p. 2)

Parenthood

Becoming a parent is a subject richly considered in film and literature, and I have found a number of short stories that are useful to our discussion of difficult legal and human rights questions. Prenatal sex selection is an issue in “The Ultrasound” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in Arranged Marriage (1995), and China’s one-child policy forms the backdrop to Ma Jian’s “The Abandoner” originally published in the New Yorker magazine, and later incorporated into his book The Noodle Maker (2005). The moral complexities of paternity determination in an age of genetic testing spark the plot of Karel vanLoon’s novel A Father’s Affair (2003), which centers on a single father who discovers that he is infertile, and struggles to accept the many truths implied by the evidence that that the son he has been raising alone since his wife’s death is not his biological child.

There are also wonderful adoption stories, and I have often recommended Aimee Phan’s We Should Never Meet (2004), a series of linked stories that circle around the air lift of orphans from Saigon to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War. The French and Israeli film Live and Become (Va, Vis et Deviens, 2005) tells a complicated story of a boy sent by his mother to Israel from a refugee camp in Sudan in 1984. John Sayles’s film, Casa de los babys (2003) centers on a group of women waiting in a hotel in a foreign country to finalize adoptions.

Divorce and Family Dissolution

Many American books and movies address problems of family dissolution, including two short story collections: Fault Lines (2001), edited by Caitlin Shetterly, and Split (2002), edited

by Ava Chin. To provide a cross-cultural comparison, I have used the Prologue to Ha Jin's novel, Waiting (1999), and Sandra Cisneros's short story titled "Woman Hollering Creek" (from Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991)). Based on a suggestion from a colleague in another department, I discovered a film from Zimbabwe called Neria (1993) which deals with the difficulties faced by a woman after her husband's sudden death, particularly in the conflict between the village traditions of his family and her rights under the civil law.

For purposes of my seminar, two documentary films have been particularly useful in introducing different systems of disputing and dispute resolution. Heart of the Dragon, a series produced in the 1980s, includes one episode following the extended divorce mediation and eventual reconciliation of a young couple in China. Although aspects of the film are now somewhat dated, it quite usefully opens questions about different goals of a mediation process and the connections between family law practices and broader social and cultural norms. Ziba Mir Hosseini's Divorce Iranian Style (1998), made with Kim Longinotto, offers a fascinating look at the cases of several women brought in the religious family law courts of Tehran.

My students are very enthusiastic about this dimension of the seminar. Our discussions are sometimes uncomfortable, but notably richer and more sophisticated on the issues they have encountered through both law and literature.