



# Funny in Farsi

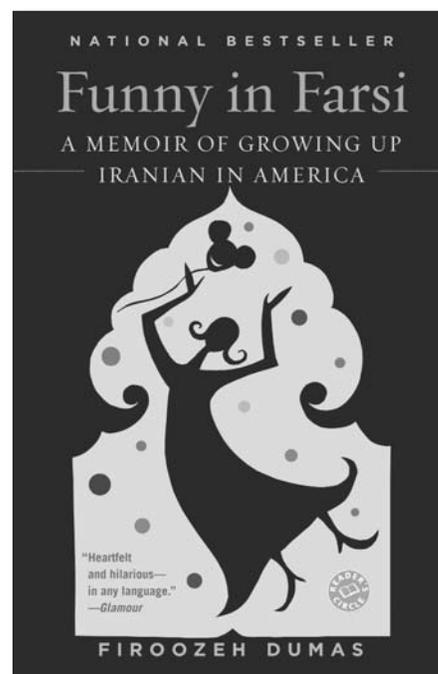
Written by Firoozeh Dumas

Finalist, Thurber Prize for American Humor

Finalist, PEN/USA Award in Creative Non-Fiction

Selected as a *School Library Journal* Adult Book for High School Students

Random House | Trade Paperback  
978-0-8129-6837-8 | 224 pp | \$12.95/\$16.95 Can.



## • note to teachers •

*Funny in Farsi* offers readers an intimate look at the immigrant experience through the lens of an exceptional—and exceptionally funny—Iranian family. Author Firoozeh Dumas teases out the everyday uniqueness of life in the United States as she recounts her family's experiences as transplants from oil-rich Abadan, Iran, to the epicenter of the American pursuit of the perfect tan: Newport Beach, California. With her wry take on everything from television commercials to Disneyland to mixed marriage, Dumas uncovers what makes America so unique and so utterly puzzling to those unacquainted with its larger-than-life customs. Her poignant descriptions of what it feels like to be a stranger in a strange land will resonate with anyone who has ever experienced social alienation at any stage of life. In her unflinching examination into the essence of the Iranian immigrant experience, Dumas exposes America as it has never before been seen.

## • about this book •

*Funny in Farsi* grew out of Firoozeh Dumas' experience of moving to Southern California in 1972 at the age of seven. She originally intended her collection of essays as a gift to her children—to show them that our commonalities far outweigh our differences—and she wrote the book almost entirely in the hours before they woke for school.

Arriving with no firsthand knowledge of this country beyond her father's glowing memories of his graduate school years here, Firoozeh learned to adapt to her new surroundings with a special eye to the more absurd elements of American culture. *Funny in Farsi* chronicles the American journey of Dumas' wonderfully engaging family: her engineer father, a sweetly quixotic dreamer; her elegant mother, who never fully mastered English; her uncle, who combated the effects of American fast food with an array of miraculous American weight-loss gadgets; and Firoozeh herself, who as a girl changed her name to Julie, and encountered a second wave of culture shock when she met and married a Frenchman.

## • about the author

FIROOZEH DUMAS was born in Abadan, Iran, and moved to California at the age of seven. After a two-year stay, she and her family moved back to Iran and resided in Ahvaz and Tehran. Two years later, Dumas returned to California, where she later attended the University of California at Berkeley. *Funny in Farsi* is her first book.

The book was a finalist for both the PEN/USA Award in 2004 and the Thurber Prize for American Humor, and has been adopted in junior high, high school and college curricula throughout the nation. It has been selected for common reading programs at several universities including: California State Bakersfield, California State University at Sacramento, Fairmont State University in West Virginia, Gallaudet University, Salisbury University, University of Wisconsin—La Crosse and the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

Dumas is also the author of *Laughing Without an Accent*, a collection of autobiographical essays published in May 2008. She currently lives with her husband and their three children in Northern California.

## • teaching ideas

*Funny in Farsi* is an excellent addition to Language Arts and Literature courses, especially those on the genre of memoir. The book is appropriate for all reading levels, and its humor and relatability will make it appealing to a wide variety of readers, from voracious to reluctant to ESL/ELL. The book lends itself to frank discussions about ethnic assumptions, cultural differences, and racial biases, and the author's tremendously entertaining and unflinching look at her own family's misadventures offers fertile territory for class discussion and analysis.

Given its expansive examination of everyday life and culture in Iran and America, *Funny in Farsi* would also be an ideal text for students of social studies and world cultures. Its depiction of life in the 1970s, and its focus on the political crises that developed between Iran and the United States at that time, would make it a useful text for courses in American and Middle Eastern history, and for classes that study the immigrant experience.

## • discussion and writing

1. How does Firoozeh feel on her first day of elementary school when her mother cannot locate Iran on a map? What kinds of assumptions might her fellow classmates make about Firoozeh's inability to speak English, her unusual Persian name, and her mother accompanying her to school? To what extent do you think language barriers are to blame for cultural misunderstandings?
2. Firoozeh's parents don't speak English fluently, and their efforts to do so often lead to embarrassment, especially for their children. Why doesn't Firoozeh do more to encourage her parents to learn English? To what extent can you relate to the experience of being embarrassed by your family?
3. How would you characterize the role of television in Firoozeh's family? Why does television's visual medium connect her relatives to American products and attitudes in ways that their language cannot?
4. How does Firoozeh's experience at Disneyland, where she is encouraged to communicate with another missing child in her native Persian, expose Western biases about people who don't speak English fluently? How do you feel about "racial profiling," or making assumptions about someone's ethnicity based on their appearance or accent? On what past occasions have you experienced or carried out racial profiling, and how do you feel about it now, in light of Firoozeh's encounter?

5. How did the experiences of Firoozeh and her family in America compare to how their friends who arrived after the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis were treated? Why are immigrants whose native countries are in conflict with their adopted country sometimes subjected to mistreatment and—in some cases—discrimination or abuse? What does this all-too-common phenomenon suggest about the intersection of patriotism and xenophobia?
6. Firoozeh's husband, François, experiences life as an American immigrant much differently than does Firoozeh. What do you think accounts for Americans' biases in their attitudes toward immigrants from different countries? To what extent are these biases grounded in stereotypes about the immigrants' native countries?
7. How does Firoozeh's experience of sleepaway camp highlight the social isolation she experiences as someone who is perceived by others as "different"? How does her decision not to bathe the entire two weeks contribute to her loneliness? To what extent can you relate to her feeling of being "invisible" at camp?
8. What does Firoozeh's decision to take an American name suggest about her feelings toward her adopted country? What might her name change to Julie suggest about her identity as an immigrant? How does her dual identity (and her ability to speak English without any discernable accent) enable her to see how Americans *really* feel about Iran?
9. Firoozeh's father, Kazem, is grateful for his opportunity to vote as a naturalized American citizen. Why might being able to vote make someone feel especially connected with one's community or country? Based on the information about Iran you have learned from *Funny in Farsi*, how do the political rights of Iranian citizens compare to the political rights of American citizens?
10. How is the Thanksgiving meal at Firoozeh's house a metaphor for her American assimilation? To what extent might eating another culture's traditional cuisine enable one to better understand its people?
11. How did the promise of education in America change Kazem's life forever? To what extent does education seem to hold the same opportunities for both immigrants from foreign countries and native citizens?
13. How does Firoozeh's interaction with her many relatives compare to your involvement with your extended family? To what extent is the notion of one's family defined differently by each culture? How might one measure the importance of the family in American society?
13. How does Firoozeh's experience of violence during the Shah's visit with President Carter in 1977 affect her? How do you think Firoozeh is able to reconcile this experience of violence and racial hatred with her appreciation for all that America offers her family?
14. How does Firoozeh's engagement to François, a French Catholic, affect her relationship with her parents? To what extent does her mother's reaction to the news reflect her acceptance of the changing realities of contemporary life in America? Are mixed marriages (ethnic, religious, racial, etc.) accepted or considered controversial in your community, and why?
15. How does Firoozeh's use of humor to describe her experiences as an Iranian immigrant in America enable you to appreciate the more confusing or mystifying aspects of American culture? How would the experience of reading this book differ for you if it were told from a more serious perspective? Of the many humorous moments detailed by Firoozeh Dumas, which was most memorable for you, and why?

## • suggested activities

1. Ask your students to address some of the more confusing elements of American culture that Firoozeh Dumas pokes fun at in *Funny in Farsi*, and have them prepare an essay in which they describe the experience of viewing their country through the eyes of one unaccustomed to its idiosyncrasies. Ask your students to analyze how effective *Funny in Farsi* is at using humor to bridge the cultural divide between author and reader.
2. Ask your students to pretend they have just arrived in America, knowing nothing about Americans or American culture, and have them watch the evening news for 5 consecutive nights. Ask them to then write about their impressions of Americans and share these thoughts with the class. This exercise is particularly useful in helping students understand how Iranians, or other groups, often feel about having almost entirely negative news shown about them on a consistent basis, and it also raises issues for discussion of media and its impact on how people formulate opinions and biases.
3. Ask your students to reimagine one of the typically humorous chapters in *Funny in Farsi* from the perspective of an Iranian immigrant who arrives in America soon after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. How did American sentiment toward citizens of Middle Eastern descent change in the wake of terrorism on American soil? You may also ask your students to describe their own stereotypes about Middle Easterners or Iranians, and how their attitudes changed in the course of reading *Funny in Farsi*.
4. Remind your students that Firoozeh Dumas reveals the experience of what it feels like to be an Iranian immigrant through a series of brief and humorous episodes from her everyday life. Have your students then brainstorm the events or incidents they would include in memoirs of their lives. Ask them to consider how many of the events they would include are rites of passage, like Dumas's wedding or her first day of school in America, or whether they are more simply snapshots from their lives. Have your students prepare mini-memoirs in which they connect a series of these memories together in a narrative. Ask them to share their memoirs with their classmates, and to identify what the events they've chosen to include (and exclude) reveal about them.

## • vocabulary

Firoozeh Dumas defines most Persian words in context in the course of *Funny in Farsi*, but the following terms may be useful to readers:

- *ameh*, – father's sister
- *amoo*, – father's brother
- *aqd*, – Persian wedding ceremony
- *dye-yee*, – mother's brother
- *khaleh*, – mother's sister
- *pessar ameh*, – son of father's sister
- *pessar amoo*, – son of father's brother
- *shohar ameh*, – husband of father's sister
- *shohar khaleh*, – husband of mother's sister
- *sofreh*, – a hand-sewn cloth on which family arranges food and objects that carry special meaning in the traditional wedding ceremony

## • beyond the book

1. *Funny in Farsi* refers to a number of political controversies that arose between Iran and the United States in the 1970s, including the hostage crisis, the Iranian Revolution, and the rise of anti-Shah sentiment in America. Ask your students to research more about the history of American-Iranian relations, with a particular focus on the years covered in *Funny in Farsi*. Encourage your students to examine the American-Iranian relationship today, and to consider how the status of this international affiliation has changed in the past thirty years. How would Firoozeh and her family have experienced America as Iranian immigrants if they had arrived today?
2. In the past few years, a number of memoirs have been published that examine the Iranian immigrant experience in America, many of them penned by women. Ask your students to select a memoir from the list on page 7 of this guide and to prepare essays that compare and contrast both works. In their analyses of the works, students may want to consider such themes as cultural assimilation, social alienation, political disenfranchisement, and political empowerment.
3. Firoozeh Dumas is also the author of the nonfiction collection, *Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of an Iranian American, at Home and Abroad*. Ask your students to read Dumas' other book and prepare an essay in which they analyze how Dumas' opinion of the United States has changed over the years, as her acquaintance with this country has grown. Students may want to explore how the immigrant experience evolves from childhood to adulthood.

## • Funny in Farsi has been selected for the following programs:

One Book, One College -  
Common Reading Programs/  
Freshman Year Reading:

California State University at Bakersfield  
California State University at Sacramento  
Fairmont State University  
Gallaudet University  
Sage College  
Salisbury University  
University of Wisconsin at La Crosse  
University of Wisconsin at Madison

### Community Reads:

Bensenville, Illinois - 2008  
Berkeley Reads - 2006  
Cape Ann Community Reads - 2006  
Community Reads - 2008  
Lamorinda Reads (CA) - 2008  
One Book, One Whittier - 2005  
Orange County Reads One Book - 2004  
Palo Alto Reads - 2006  
The Big Read, Dayton, Ohio - 2008  
Wood Dale and Ithasca (IL) - 2008

### High School Summer Reading (a partial list):

Castilleja School  
Crystal Springs Uplands School  
Hebron Academy  
Notre Dame High School  
Santa Monica High School  
Watchung Hills Regional High School

# Praise for *Funny in Farsi*

“I think she’s done a magical thing, which is to stimulate conversations about a culture that many young people are in danger of casting as the enemy. Instead, they are seeing how similar our culture is to theirs, how all kids are embarrassed by their parents.”

—Carol Jago, Co-Director of The California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA and Vice President, National Council of Teachers of English

“Even my most reluctant students were engaged with the text. I couldn’t believe my eyes. They were laughing, commenting and asking their classmates about the book. Even they were surprised. I owe you a thank you. Trying to find stories these students are interested in is no easy task. An Iranian girl growing up in America didn’t necessarily scream ‘Inspires Inner-City Kids.’ To my surprise, it did. They felt a connection that I guess I overlooked, that they too feel like outsiders at times.”

—Kristen Mills, Teacher, Meadowdale High School, Dayton, Ohio

“What’s charming beyond the humor of this memoir is that it remains affectionate even in the weakest, most tenuous moments for the culture. It’s the brilliance of true sophistication at work.”

—Los Angeles Times Book Review

“Today, as Middle Easterners in the United States are subject to racial profiling, stereotyping, and sometimes violence, this book provides a valuable glimpse into the immigrant experiences of one very entertaining family.”

—Library Journal

“Remarkable...told with wry humor shorn of sentimentality.... In the end, what sticks with the reader is an exuberant immigrant embrace of America.”

—San Francisco Chronicle

“*Funny with Farsi* captivated our campus as the book choice for our inaugural New Student Reader Program. Its message of shared humanity resonated with everyone, regardless of age, background or color. Firoozeh Dumas not only educated our students she entertained them as well as our Fall Convocation speaker. I highly recommend it for any First Year Experience reading program.”

—Lawanda Dockins-Gordy, Director New Student Experience and Guerrieri University Center, Salisbury University

“What was really impressive, and what will stay with us always, was Firoozeh’s incredible engagement with a wide range of students, faculty and staff. She’s a skilled and funny speaker, as we know. But we didn’t realize just how powerful she is in small groups. She fielded questions from our fairly sophisticated journalism students (and had a fascinating discussion about humor in Farsi, humor in American Sign Language) as well as from some African students who are new to American culture and to higher education. She questioned just about every student who came to the book signing—she wanted to know their stories. A couple of my students spent some time with her, and later wrote in their journals how she’d inspired them with her simple message—everyone has a story! They expected an author to be unapproachable, and they were just thrilled at what a ‘regular person’ she was with them! In short, Firoozeh was her usual amazing self.”

—Judy Termini, Interim Director of First Year Experience Programs, Gallaudet University

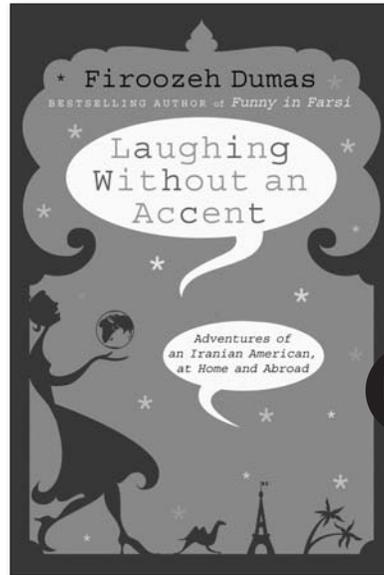
“We chose *Funny in Farsi* as our first community-wide read book in Palo Alto, and it was the perfect choice. The book is very readable—both humorous and touching—and it is quite accessible to everyone from middle school students to adults. It is also excellent for promoting cultural understanding, which is always a good thing in these times. In addition, Firoozeh Dumas is an absolutely wonderful speaker; she is as funny as any stand-up comedienne. We also invited Firoozeh to work with high school classes, and the students enjoyed the book and her presence so much that they clamored for her to return later in the school year. I would unhesitatingly recommend *Funny in Farsi* to any community looking for a great book for a community read.”

—Maya Spector, Coordinator of Library Programs/School Liaison, Palo Alto City Library

“What an unexpected pleasure it was to work closely with Firoozeh Dumas! Not only was her book funny—which made it extremely popular—but she made it fun to have her at the myriad events we sponsored. What a trooper she was, regaling audiences in schools, libraries, or wherever. Whether elders or children, the audiences always found something both heartwarming and hilarious in her remarks. Firoozeh showed us that we truly have more in common than we have differences. We would do it all over again in a minute!”

—Mary E. Barton, Ph.D., Co-Chair, Orange County Reads One Book

• also available by Firoozeh Dumas



**LAUGHING WITHOUT AN ACCENT**

*Adventures of an Iranian American, at Home and Abroad*

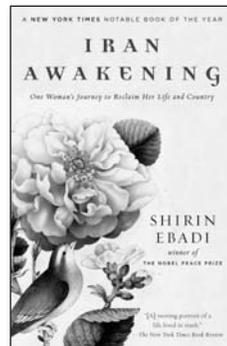
Funny in Farsi author Firoozeh Dumas returns with *Laughing Without an Accent* to tell more stories about her hilarious, warm, and loving family, and the experience of being not just an American, but a citizen of the world. Whether describing her Iranian family's wonder at her French husband's Christmas traditions, or comparing questionable delicacies in international cuisines, or what it's like to live in the International House college dorm when you're an American after all, Firoozeh Dumas' wit, warmth, and insight illuminate the universality of the human condition, and show how our differences can become our bonds.

Villard Books | HC | 978-0-345-49956-1 | 240 pp | \$22.00/\$25.00 Can.

**VISIT THE OFFICIAL AUTHOR WEBSITE OF FIROOZEH DUMAS:**

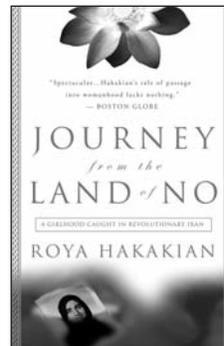
Stay current on author events, download content and information for educators, contact the author, and more. Go to [www.firoozehdumas.com](http://www.firoozehdumas.com).

• other titles of interest

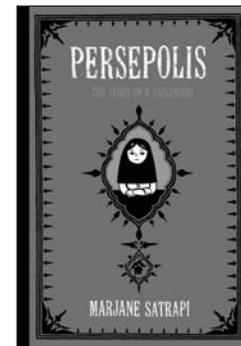


*Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country*  
by Shirin Abadi and Azadeh Moaveni

*All the Shah's Men*  
by Stephen Kinzer



*Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*  
by Roya Hakakian



*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*  
by Marjane Satrapi

• about this guide's writer

This guide was prepared by JULIE COOPER, a writer from Bainbridge Island, Washington. A graduate of Harvard University, Oxford University, and the University of Washington, Julie has taught beginning and advanced fiction writing at the University of Washington, and works as a freelance writer of educational materials and reading group guides for several major publishers.

## • other available guides

We have developed teacher's guides to help educators by providing questions that explore reading themes, test reading skills and evaluate reading comprehension. These guides have been written by teachers like you and other experts in the fields of writing and education. Each book is appropriate for high school readers. Reading ability, subject matter and interest level have been considered in each teacher's guide.

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### Fiction:

Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**  
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Purple Hibiscus**  
Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot**  
Bradbury, Ray. **Fahrenheit 451**  
Brooks, Terry. **The Shannara Trilogy**  
Butler, William. **The Butterfly Revolution**  
Cather, Willa. **My Antonia**  
Cisneros, Sandra. **The House on Mango Street**  
Clark, William van Tilburg. **The Ox-Bow Incident**  
Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**  
Cook, Karin. **What Girls Learn**  
Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**  
Doctorow, E.L. **Ragtime**  
Drew, Alan. **Gardens of Water**  
Dunn, Mark. **Ella Minnow Pea**  
Ellis, Ella Throp. **Swimming with the Whales**  
Ellison, Ralph. **Invisible Man**  
Gaines, Ernest. **A Lesson Before Dying**  
García Márquez, Gabriel. **Chronicle of a Death Foretold**  
Gibbons, Kaye. **Ellen Foster**  
Guterson, David. **Snow Falling on Cedars**  
Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**  
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**  
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**  
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**  
Jones, Lloyd. **Mister Pip**  
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**  
Khedairi, Betool. **Absent**  
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**  
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**  
Matar, Hisham. **In the Country of Men**  
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**  
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**  
McCarthy, Susan Carol. **Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands**  
Miéville, China. **Un Lun Dun**  
Mitchell, David. **Black Swan Green**  
Mori, Kyoko. **Shizuko's Daughter**  
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**  
Naylor, Gloria. **Mama Day**  
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**  
Potok, Chaim. **The Chosen**  
Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass**  
Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass**  
Pullman, Philip. **The Subtle Knife**  
Rawles, Nancy. **My Jim**  
Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**  
Richter, Conrad. **The Light in the Forest**  
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**

Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**  
Shaara, Michael. **The Killer Angels**  
Shute, Neil. **On the Beach**  
Sinclair, Upton. **The Jungle**  
Smith, Alexander McCall. **The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency**  
Sparks, Christine. **The Elephant Man**  
Spiegelman, Art. **Maus I**  
Tan, Amy. **The Joy Luck Club**  
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**  
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**  
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**  
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**  
Voigt, Cynthia. **Homecoming**  
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Cat's Cradle**  
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five**  
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**  
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

### Nonfiction:

Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**  
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**  
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**  
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**  
Bryson, Bill. **Short History of Nearly Everything**  
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**  
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**  
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**  
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**  
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**  
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**  
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**  
Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. **Made to Stick**  
Hickam, Homer. **October Sky**  
Hunter, Latoya. **The Diary of Latoya Hunter**  
Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. **In My Place**  
Katz, Jon. **Geeks**  
Kennedy, Randall. **Nigger**  
Kidder, Tracy. **Mountains Beyond Mountains**  
Lewis, Anthony. **Gideon's Trumpet**  
Miller, Jennifer. **Inheriting the Holy Land**  
Nafisi, Azar. **Reading Lolita in Tehran**  
Nazario, Sonia. **Enrique's Journey**  
Opdyke, Irene Gut. **In My Hands**  
Pollan, Michael. **The Botany of Desire**  
Santiago, Esmeralda. **Almost a Woman**  
Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**  
Suskind, Ron. **A Hope in the Unseen**  
Taylor, Nick. **American-Made**  
Thomas, Piri. **Down These Mean Streets**  
Whiteley, Opal. **Opal: The Journey of an Understanding Heart**