The True American: Murder and Mercy in Texas by Anand Giridharadas
Reading Guide for GVSU's 2016-2017 Community Reading Project
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“In order to create a World Without Hate, we must remember, it cannot be achieved unless a world without hate is first achieved in our hearts and minds. I am dedicated to transforming the human heart, one heart at a time.”
-- Rais Bhuiyan

Before Reading

1) “Those interested in both the best and worst of what it means to be American should read The True American” (Amy Kamp, Austin Chronicle). Discuss the meaning of this statement and indicate your views on the best and worst of what it means to be American. Pay attention to the title as it is mentioned throughout the book and reflect on its multiple meanings as you read.

2) Reflect on your personal memories from 9/11. If you were too young to recall this event, reflect on how your opinions and feelings surrounding this day were formed through family members’ stories and/or the media. What is your sense of how 9/11 impacted our country as a whole? Specifically, what changed following 9/11?

3) “This is a true story” (xi). Why is it important for the author to note this from the beginning? How does it shape the way that you will read this book?

4) Consider your views on immigrants and immigration before opening this book. What do you think or know about individuals and/or families who immigrate to the United States? Have you seen any recent media coverage about debates surrounding immigration to the United States?

Before Reading Resources
GVSU’s Community Reading Project (CRP) Website: www.gvsu.edu/read
TED Talk by Anand Giridharadas: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i-pNVj5KMw

Leavings (1-32) & The Chore (33-52)

1) How did Rais imagine the United States before arriving? How does he characterize Americans after several encounters in Dallas?

2) Discuss how the plans of Rais change over time in this opening chapter? What are his life goals? How does he plan to achieve them? Compare his aspirations to your own.

3) What did you learn about Islam in this chapter? About life in Bangladesh?

4) Tom Boston introduces us to Mark Stroman in this chapter of the book. How would you characterize the many threads of Stroman's motivation to kill? What fuels his rage?

5) Why does Stroman refer to his act of violence as “the chore”?
Outpatient (53-68) & 187 (69-110)

1) Rais fully believes in America as a land of economic opportunity, and is willing to struggle in order to build the life he wants here. Even when faced with literally the worst of America (racism, violence, tens of thousands of dollars in medical debt) he perseveres. And he's alone in this country: his parents, family, and loved ones are on the other side of the ocean. What's the source of his optimism and persistence? Faced with similar circumstances, do you think you would have responded like Rais?

2) How must he navigate the healthcare system in the United States? “Rais wondered what happened in America to patients like him (59). What does happen? Do you have any life experiences that speak to this issue?

3) How does Rais understand the motivations of Stroman?

4) How would Rais be treated at home if he needed “help” with handling emotional trauma compared to the American system? Why can’t he go home?

5) Discuss the following line, “In time, he would discover how debt contradicted those attributes of the republic for which he had left home: how it bound you to history, and kept you who you were, and replaced the metaphor of the frontier with that of a treadmill” (63). How does debt change Rais’ perception of America? How does it change his pursuit of his goals?

6) Discuss the symbols that Stroman surrounds himself with and analyze how he interprets these. What symbols are important in your own life? What do these mean to you? Do these symbols mean something different to others?

7) What assumptions underlie Stroman’s Manifesto?

8) What does Ghiridharadas mean when he says, “What had probably never occurred to Mark Stroman was that his tendency to hate could ultimately save his life” (77)?

9) Discuss the nuances the jury needed to consider when deciding Stroman’s fate. What must be the case to prove Capital punishment?

10) How does hearing about Stroman’s childhood impact your view of him? After hearing the litany of Stroman’s encounters with the law, do you think that he could have become someone else? Did he have a chance? Why is this question so important to Giridharadas?

11) What systemic problems does this chapter highlight with regard to the interlocking institutions of law, family and school in America? What responsibility does the criminal justice system have for offering rehabilitation, training, education, especially to juvenile offenders? How might those kinds of programs changed Stroman’s course?

Hospitaliano! (111-130), [Please Write Back] (131-154), Frequent-Flyer Miles (155-165)

1) What changed between Rais and Abida when they finally meet again in 2002?

2) Why does Rais choose to resume his life in Texas? What challenges does he face with his new job? How does he manage these challenges and his fears?

3) Discuss the observations that Rais makes about his American co-workers. What perplexes him? How is the family structure different in America?
4) Do you agree that liberty and selfhood in excess can fail people as much as the strictures of a society like Bangladesh (121)? Why or why not? What is the nature of Freedom precisely?

5) How does the shooting of Waqar Hasan impact his family? What similarities exist between his immigration story and Rais’?

6) Do you agree with Holt’s statements on immigration (127)? Why or why not?

7) Compare Stroman’s description of Death Row to your own preconceived notions. How does Stroman conceive of himself compared to other prisoners?

8) How are mental health issues addressed in the prison system? For the inmates? For the guards? What questions does this raise for you?

9) How does Stroman’s letters shed light on his challenges with prison life? How does prison change Stroman?

10) What is Stroman’s explanation to Ziv about why he killed on September 15th? Did this help you better understand his motives? Why or why not?

11) What is the purpose of spiritual pilgrimage? Why was it so important for Rais to bring his mother on the pilgrimage to Mecca? What did they each gain from this sacred journey?

12) How is Rais’ perception of money shaped by living in America? Why is this important to understand as his story unfolds?

Gadfly (166-199)


2) Engage Ziv’s existential questions: “If we all harbor the germs of evil, why do they infect some of us and spare others? Is evil always a choice or can it at times be explained by context and circumstance” (178). How does Ziv ultimately see the issue of evil?

3) What was the worst day of Ilan Ziv's life? How does the Israeli invasion of Lebanon shape his views on the questions posed in Question #3?

4) How does Ziv’s personal history shed light on how and why he "befriends" Mark Stroman? How and why does he develop empathy for the convicted murderer? What lessons does this provide us with as readers?

5) Are you able to empathize, through Ziv’s account, with Mark Stroman? Why or why not? When have you been the victim? The victimizer?

6) What combination of factors influenced Stroman to finally see his own racism (190-191)? Do you think that this combination of factors would work for everyone? Why or why not?

7) As a reader, why might you want to believe Stroman’s reflections and growth are genuine? Why might you want to believe his is simply saying what he believes Ziv and others want to hear?

8) Stroman’s sister Mary believes that her brother is a sick man and that the system failed him. Which American institutions do you think that she holds accountable for her brother’s situation? Why?
The New American (200-232) & Bro (233-254)

1) What does American citizenship mean to Rais? How is Dallas characterizes with regard to its treatment of immigrants? How would you characterize where you live with regard to this same question?


3) How does Rais’ activism impact Europe? How did it impact him? What critiques did he receive? How did he handle these critiques?

4) Why did Rais file a lawsuit against Governor Rick Perry? What three claims were offered? Why is Shariah Law involved?

5) How would you characterize Stroman’s interaction with family members days before his scheduled execution date? How did you feel as you were reading his final conversations and wishes? http://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/last-meals-of-death-row/

6) Share your feelings as you read the end of this chapter.

Uncle (255-278), Powerpoint (279-293), Hula Hoop (294-311), Arrivals (312-314)

1) Why does Rais want to help Stroman's daughter, Amber? What is the larger mission of “World without Hate”? http://worldwithouthate.org/

2) Why does Rais feel like the American Dream has stopped working for people like the Stromans? What does Rais think it will take to break the cycle from the “SAD” life? Is his assessment here of the state of the American Dream and the cycle accurate? Why or why not?

3) How do the children of Mark Stroman struggle to make sense of their father’s life? What are their hopes and fears for the future? For the future of their children? How does class play a large role in the struggle for the American dream for Stroman’s daughters?

4) How is Rais’s work life at odds with the goals of his non-profit organization’s aims? How is he able to handle this incongruity?

5) What challenges does Rais face with entering the dating scene?

6) How do you feel about the shifts in the Stroman family near the end of the book? What/who is to credit for the positive change in Amber's life? Tena's? Erica’s?

7) Interpret the title of the book. Who is the True American? How is this relevant to your own understanding of identity and patriotism?

8) How is reading this book particularly relevant in an election year? Did this shape how you view any particular candidate? If so, how?