Gate-crashing the party: the American Immigration Story

In one sense, it is absurd to try to list books and media about American immigration, for this is the great theme of America. Most books and movies produced by Americans are in one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, about the immigrant experience or its consequences. Still, here are a few directly and consciously addressing this theme that have caught my eye.

reading & watching suggestions

General Survey Books

*The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, Oscar Handlin. Awarded the 1952 Pulitzer Prize in history, The Uprooted chronicles the common experiences of the millions of European immigrants who came to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—their fears, their hopes, their expectations.” Focused on the Ellis Island years.

*Becoming American*, Thomas Archdeacon. A textbook, meaning it will be a good, clear, balanced overview of all American immigration, if dry.

*Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, Roger Daniels (Perennial: 2002). A large work, also meant as a textbook, focusing on the major ethnic groups and events.


politics of immigration

*Huddled Masses, Muddled Laws: Why Contemporary Immigration Policy Fails to Reflect Public Opinion*, Kenneth K. Lee (Praeger, 1998). Despite its age, this study remains relevant, since his insight into how social and political pressures affect legislation and how laws have unintended consequences.
*The Ethics of Immigration*, by Joseph Carens (2013), argues “Immigrants belong” and that borders are enforcers of global inequality, “the modern equivalent of feudal class privilege.”

*Heaven’s Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy*, by George J. Borjas, described by Business Week and the Wall Street Journal as “America’s leading immigration economist”, argues a skeptical line about the value of low-skilled immigrants to an advanced economy.
Specific Nationalities

**Spanish:** *The Old Franciscan Missions Of California*, by George Wharton James. Available in print version or as an ebook: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13854/13854-h/13854-h.htm.

**Mexican:** *A Better Life*, a warm film about a father and son of the Mexican underclass in contemporary California.

**Irish:** *Paddy’s Lament*, Thomas Gallagher (Harcourt, Grace, & Co, 1982). Because it leans slightly toward historical fiction, it can take the reader closer to participating in the events, the feels and smells, while keeping historical accuracy and balance.

_In America_ (2002). Director Jim Sheridan’s semi-autobiographical account of an immigrant Irish family’s efforts to survive in New York City. Nominated for three Academy Awards.

**Scots-Irish:** *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance (2016). For the Protestant Irish, there are many explorations of their experience and culture but this one is a new study/memoir of their legacy in America.

**Chinese:** *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan.


**Jewish:** *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*, by Lucette Lagnado

_Call It Sleep*, 1934 by Henry Roth. A classic of immigration literature.

*Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire*, Alexander Beider. A way of researching a Jewish lineage from the Pale of Settlement.

**Italian:** *Christ in Concrete*, Pietro di Donato (1939), a moving novel of a laboring-class Italian-American family.

“A View from the Bridge”, Arthur Miller’s tragedy about Italian illegal immigrants, ethnic loyalty, and the betrayals of the heart.


*New Italian American Migrations to the United States*, by Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra (2017). Just out in two volumes and not yet read by me.

**French Canadian:** *Jeanne la Fileuse (Jeanne the Mill Girl)*, Honoré Beaugrand, 1878

**Swedish:** *The Emigrants*, Vilhelm Moberg (1949~59) A famous trilogy, the first part of which was made into one of the finest social history films.
other books, films, etc. of interest

Letters from an American Farmer (1782), by Hector St. John de Crévecoeur. In this classic American memoir and social commentary, an 18C French immigrant explains America.

How the Other Half Lives, by Jacob Riis (New York: Sagamore Press, reprinted 1957). This Danish immigrant became a great photographer and social reformer, whom Teddy Roosevelt called “The finest American I have met.”

Golden Door, a decent film that captures some of the sense of dislocation and difficulty of the Atlantic crossing.

Gangs of New York, film by Martin Scorsese. Pretty gritty, and will cure most romantic notions of the good old days of immigrants in America.


Immigration songs & music (CDs)

Thousands Are Sailing for Irish immigration songs,
Stranded in America for other ethnicities.
Ellis Island Dream of America, a composition of original music scored behind some actors reading Ellis Island stories.

The Ballad of America. John Anthony Scott (Bantam, 1966). A book (not CD) compendium of songs of the people, from the colonial period through the Civil Rights Movement. Songs of the poor were often by or about immigrants. This collection is an old example of a genre; there have been many similar collections published since.

Websites, of course

NYC Tenement House Virtual Tour: http://www.tenement.org/Virtual_Tour/.
genealogy research: If the free Ellis Island online resources do not give you what you want, then on the US Citizen and Immigration Services website, you can pay (a small amount) for someone to research your genealogy for you. Go to http://www.uscis.gov, “Education and Resources”, then “Genealogy”.

Bureau of Immigrations & Customs Enforcement: www.ice.gov.

Primary Sources


Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012 (US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, US Census Bureau. Here is a 1-volume snapshot of the US in 2012. A stunning compendium of statistics, immigration included. The definitive answer for many misconceptions. The volume costs about $50 but the CD can be had online for free.

or, a radical idea:

approach your gardener, or handyman, or local taco stand ladies, and invite this person or persons out for a cheap lunch. Reassure them that you are not undercover Dept. of Homeland Security, and ask them their story.