

DISCUSSION GUIDE

READ

The Story of Us
by Catherine Hernandez

LEARN

Why critics call Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program a 'breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery'

TAKE ACTION

Act now to protect the human rights of Canada's migrant workers

**JUL/AUG
2024**

Migrant farm workers harvest produce at Pfenning's Organic Farms in New Hamburg, Ontario, in 2018. The farm owners would like their Jamaican workers afforded better pathways to becoming permanent residents and have open work permits that allow them to easily change employers.

Photo by Jim Rankin/Toronto Star via Getty Images

AMNESTY.CA/BOOKCLUB

A COMMUNITY THAT READS, LEARNS & ACTS TOGETHER



Ketty Nivyabandi
Photo by Dave Chan

Amnesty International is a human rights organization and global movement of more than 10 million people in over 170 countries and territories who campaign for human rights.

Ketty Nivyabandi

**Secretary General
Amnesty International Canada**

Welcome to Amnesty International Canada's Book Club. You are a critical part of this community that reads, learns, and acts together for a better world. This discussion guide is intended to help spark conversations about the major human rights issues of our time, as we explore recent notable works of fiction.

Over 13,000 Amnesty Book Club members were invited to discuss the 2023 national bestseller, *The Story of Us*, in July and August. This poignant and intimate story explores the impact of Canada's Temporary Foreign Workers program on its most vulnerable participants.

Following his 14-day visit to Canada last year, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Tomoya Obokata, released a report this summer on the vulnerability of migrant workers within Canada's foreign-worker programs, calling them 'a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery.'

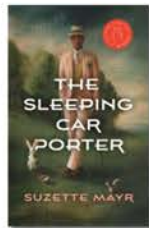
I applaud the Special Rapporteur for highlighting the need for the Canadian government to do more to protect labour rights. Canada has work to do to ensure we not only eliminate modern forms of slavery but also create an environment where it is impossible for them to take root.

SAVE THE DATE



**CATHERINE HERNANDEZ
LIVE AUTHOR EVENT**
Sunday, September 15
7-8:30 PM EDT on Zoom

Previous
in 2024



JAN/FEB



MAR/APR

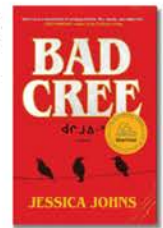


MAY/JUNE

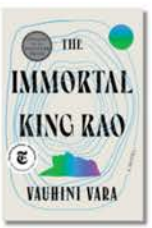


JUL/AUG

Upcoming
in 2024



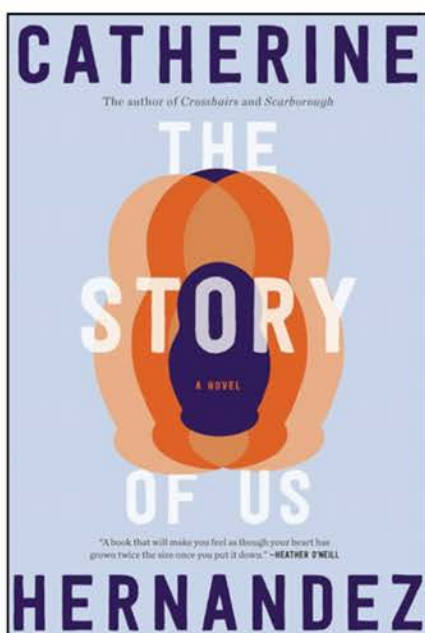
SEPT/OCT



NOV/DEC



THE BOOK



The Story of Us

By Catherine Hernandez
HarperCollins Canada, 2023

The Story of Us by Catherine Hernandez is a compelling novel that delves into the life of Mary Grace "MG" Concepcion, a young wife and migrant worker from the Philippines who travels firstly to Hong Kong and then to Canada for better opportunities. MG endures challenging and often exploitative work environments, reflecting the real-life struggles many temporary foreign workers face in Canada. MG's story is told by her unborn child, adding a uniquely profound and intimate layer to the novel as it explores themes of sacrifice, resilience, and the quest for belonging.

MG's journey reveals the systemic issues identified by migrant-led organizations, Canadian civil society, unions, academics, and the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery. Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program exacerbates the power imbalance between workers and employers by tying workers to a specific employer through closed work permits.

As we see in the narrative describing MG's precarious situation, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program leaves workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Like many real-life migrant workers, MG faces a reality where her rights are abused, her ability to seek justice is constrained, and her livelihood is tied to the whims of her employers.

As MG transitions to a new role as a Personal Support Worker for Liz, an elderly transgender woman living with Alzheimer's disease, the novel shifts its focus to themes of chosen family and the power of human connection. MG forms a deep and transformative friendship with Liz, which challenges her perceptions and helps her grow as an individual. This relationship, set against the backdrop of a flawed and often harsh system, underscores the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of compassion and solidarity in the face of systemic injustice.

Sources: HarperCollins Canada, catherinehernandezcreates.com



Photo by Noor Khan

Catherine Hernandez
Author & Screenwriter

LEARN MORE



Catherine Hernandez on CBC Radio's *The Next Chapter*
<https://cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter>



TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS

'A breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery'



Jane (below), a cleaner and caregiver in Toronto, faces many barriers to becoming a permanent resident in Canada.



Tony (above right), a temporary foreign worker from Honduras, quit his farm job in Alberta after injuring his knees and not receiving the pay he was promised.

People who come to Canada under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program carry out crucial work—they help to keep Canada's food, care, construction and hospitality sectors (to name a few) functioning.

However, the program is criticized by many, including migrant worker groups, civil society, unions, academics, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery.

Employers were cleared to hire 239,646 temporary foreign workers in 2023, double the number 5 years ago.

The program's structure, which ties workers to specific employers through closed work permits, creates an environment ripe for exploitation. Workers are often placed in vulnerable positions where they are afraid to report abuses due to the risk of deportation or job loss. This system institutionalizes power imbalances, making it difficult for workers to exercise their rights or seek justice.

“

It's an arduous journey for participants who are vulnerable to financial, physical, and sexual abuse living in their employer's households. Sometimes they don't have a door. Sometimes they don't have a proper room. Sometimes they aren't given a lot to eat. They're cheated out of their paycheque. They're cheated out of their time.

Catherine Hernandez, Author & Screenwriter

Source: *The Ampersand Review, 2023*



Photos above: (top left) Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star via Getty Images, (top right) Vince Talotta/Toronto Star via Getty Images

Sources: Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), United Nations

CANADA'S TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS PROGRAM

Above: Conroy Sterling (left) and Desmond Daley, both Temporary Foreign Workers from Jamaica, pack freshly cut cilantro at Pfenning's Organic Farms.

Temporary foreign workers in Canada frequently encounter issues such as wage theft, substandard living conditions, and limited access to healthcare. The UN Special Rapporteur also received reports of physical, emotional and verbal abuse, excessive work hours, limited breaks, and sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse.

The program's design fails to provide adequate protection and leaves workers without access to justice when their rights are violated. The lack of a clear pathway to permanent residency increases these vulnerabilities, trapping workers in cycles of dependency and exploitation.

LEARN MORE



Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokat

(July 22, 2024): <https://documents.un.org/doc/unoc/gen/g24/120/97/pdf/g2412097.pdf>



Read Amnesty's statement on Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker's Program: <https://amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/canada-foreign-worker-programs/>

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[The] temporary foreign worker program [in Canada] serves as a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery.

Tomoya Obokat, UN Special Rapporteur

To address these issues, Canada must abolish the closed work permit in all labour migration programs and grant open work permits to Temporary Foreign Workers Program participants and other migrant workers.

Upholding fairness and human dignity for all workers, regardless of their migration status, means they should have access to comprehensive protections and benefits.

Photo above by Jim Rankin/Toronto Star via Getty Images



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions are intended to spark thoughtful discussions and reflections on the book:

- The idea of the journey in fiction creates a framework for characters and readers to travel from innocence to experience, ignorance to enlightenment, or bondage to freedom. What sort of journeys are made in this book?
- How does the narrative perspective of MG's unborn child influence the reader's understanding of her experiences as an overseas Filipina worker?
- In what ways does MG's relationship with Liz challenge her understanding of gender identity?
- How does their relationship evolve throughout the novel, and what does it reveal about the power of chosen families?
- How does Catherine Hernandez portray the vulnerabilities and challenges temporary foreign workers face?
- This book deals with themes of identity, acceptance, and belonging. How do these themes manifest in the lives of MG, Liz, and the other characters?
- What are the implications of the power imbalance created by employer-specific work permits in Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program? How do these power imbalances play out as MG works for each employer?

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I'm hoping that people understand... you belong. We can love each other. We can choose each other and when we meet each other in the middle, such beautiful things can happen.

Catherine Hernandez, Author & Screenwriter

Source: *CBC's Q with Tom Power, 2023*

- The author approached the book with the following questions in mind: “How do we care for vulnerable populations? Who is caring for the caregivers? And how do we respect them?” How would you answer these questions?
- What identities are explored in this text? (i.e. race and Indigeneity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, immigration status, etc.)?
- How fair and fully dimensional did you find the representation of the main characters?
- What identity and social factors (gender, culture and background) or experiences in your life have affected your understanding of and reaction to this book?

TAKE ACTION



END CLOSED WORK PERMITS

Sign our petition calling on Canada to stop the abuses of migrant workers: amnesty.ca/temporary-foreign-workers-petition/



AMNESTY.CA/BOOKCLUB



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