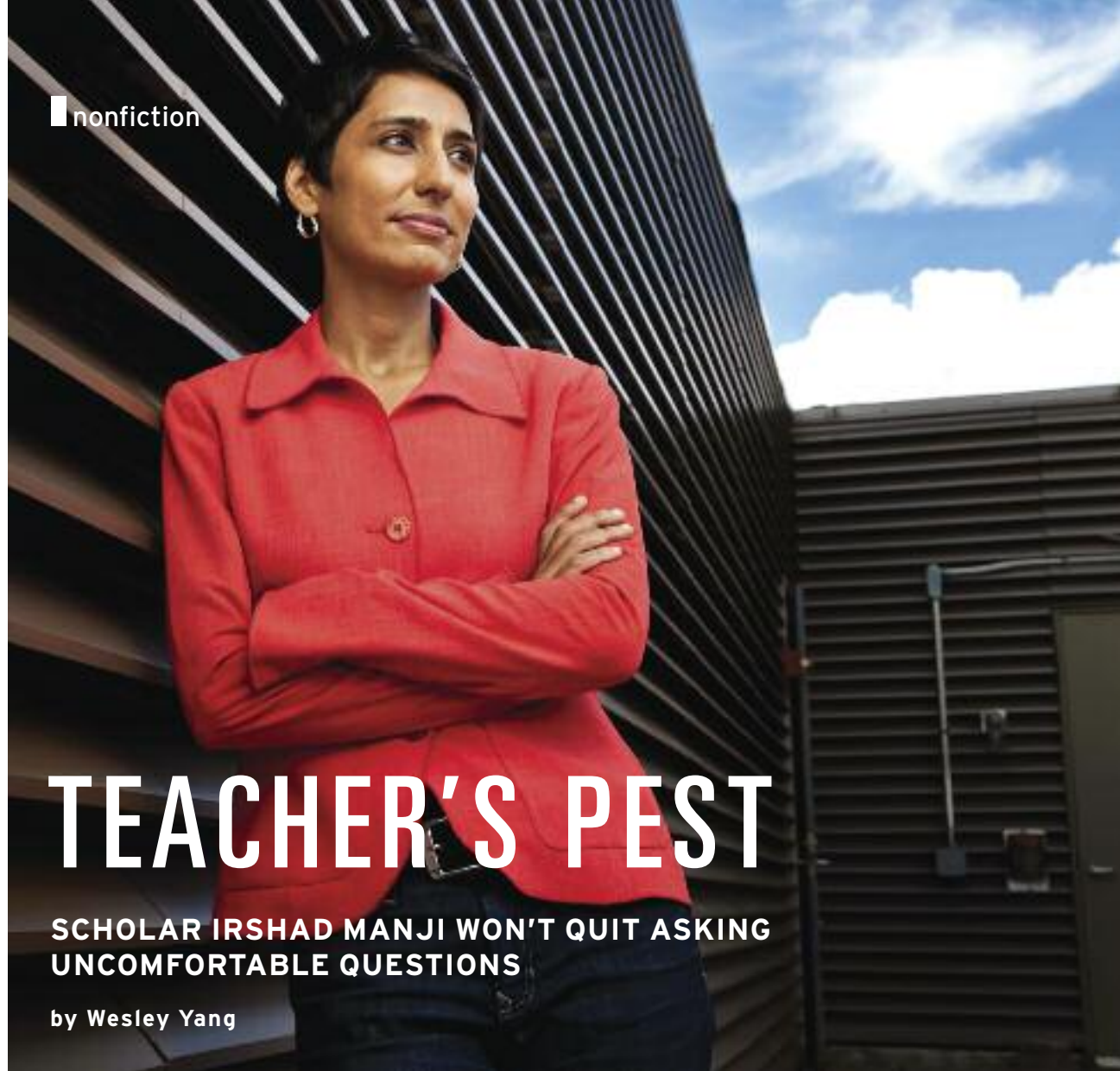


nonfiction



# TEACHER'S PEST

SCHOLAR IRSHAD MANJI WON'T QUIT ASKING UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS

by Wesley Yang

Irshad Manji is railing against what she calls “good Western liberals.” Sitting in her office in the Puck Building, the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service professor talks about a case in which one Toronto district school board, for the sake of religious diversity, had cordoned off a section of its middle-school cafeteria for Friday prayer for Muslim students—thereby, in Manji’s view, implicating itself in sexist abuses that it would not condone under any other circumstances. Boys and girls are segregated during prayer, with girls sitting well behind the boys. “Those girls who are on their periods are sent to the very back of the room,” explains Manji, noting

that she witnessed this in her own madrasa, or religious school, while growing up in suburban Vancouver. “It’s not that we were considered merely different; we were considered dirty, unhygienic. Okay? And part of the filth that corrupts when it comes near anything that is male.”

She calls that a double standard. “If the Toronto district school board people were to meet a white man who wouldn’t shake the hand of a black man for fear of being polluted, they would definitely bust his balls,” she says, but when it comes to women and Islam, “Somehow [it’s simply], ‘That’s what those people do.’”

Since the publication of her first book, *The Trouble With Islam To-*

*day: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith* (St. Martin’s Griffin), Manji has become a highly visible scourge of what she calls the sexist, racist, and anti-Semitic strains within the Islamic community, and also of the Western liberals whose misplaced reverence for other cultures, as she characterizes it, makes them complicit in this oppression. Her book posed difficult questions on the practice of “honor killing,” the discouragement of independent thought within madrassas, and the embrace of anti-Semitism at a peculiarly uncomfortable time for Islam—while American soldiers were trooping through Iraq and Afghanistan. It seemed like a strategic error to many Muslims. Some called it opportunistic pandering or

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MANJI SEES BOTH HARD-LINE MUSLIMS AND WESTERN LIBERALS AS OBSTACLES TO A MORE PROGRESSIVE ISLAM.

worse. “I’ve been spat at,” she recalls. “I’ve had people come up to me at public events and start screaming.”

But other voices began to flood her inbox as well—a global constituency, as she describes it, of thousands of individuals marooned throughout the Islamic diaspora. Manji’s self-assigned role is to use the platform that the West has granted her to provide succor to those who want to pose difficult questions to their own parents, imams, and tribal elders. Her newest book, *Allah, Liberty, and Love* (Free Press), consists of e-mails from these fugitive voices—typically young people yearning for wider freedoms—as well as brief accounts of others who broke with their own communities in defense of “universal standards of dignity and decency.” She cites crusaders such as Lillian Smith, a white Southern writer who took an antisegregation stance in the 1940s, and Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a nonviolent Pakistani activist who defended women’s equality and fought for Muslim-Hindu unity.

Such moral outliers, Manji says, exemplify the goal of the institute she leads at Wagner—the Moral Courage Project—which hosts lectures and symposia devoted to the subject and has featured speakers such as author Salman Rushdie. Manji also teaches a course designed not just to study outliers of the past but to equip young leaders to resist the settled consensus within their communities. It’s not just a matter of Muslims challenging the excesses of Islam, she says; a deadening groupthink also kept many Wall Street figures from speaking out in the lead-up to the financial crisis.

Manji is not, as many of her detractors have been quick to point out, a scholar of Islam or an

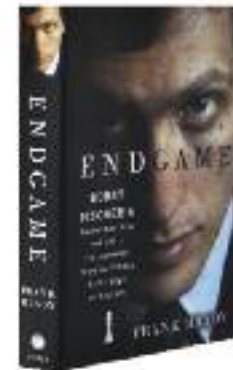
expert on any of the regions in which Islam is the dominant religion. She is, instead, a grown-up version of the pestering student she had once been: “I would ask the [madrasa] teacher, ‘Why can we not take Jews and Christians as friends?’ and ‘Why can women not lead the congregational prayer?’ And by the age of 14, I had asked one too many of these inconvenient questions and was told to get out.”

She went on to avail herself of the many freedoms afforded to Westerners—to think independently, to affirm her lesbian sexuality, to conclude that the Zionists’ historical claim to the land of Israel is a just one—and she insists that her position is as relevant as any other to the struggle for the future of Islam. “When I left, I had to remind my mother”—who brought Manji to Canada after being expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin—“I just left the madrasa. I haven’t left Allah.”

When asked whether she ever worries that her public quarrels with Islam embolden bigots and Islamophobes, Manji responds with a passionate speech that references Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who linked arms with Martin Luther King Jr. at the march at Selma. He knew that by joining the civil rights movement, he’d risk feeding the anti-Jewish sentiment in the South. “Heschel said, ‘That may very well be true, but I have to do the right thing anyway,’” Manji notes. Ultimately, she believes that such moral courage is innate in all of us: “We know that certain things are just wrong, okay? Killing your daughter for any reason, let alone to cleanse the family—that is just wrong. No matter what culture you come from, there is a basic level of human decency and dignity that you can relate to as a fellow human being. What is the right thing to do? End of story. Do it. Just do it.” ■

## bibliofile

ENDGAME: BOBBY FISCHER’S REMARKABLE RISE AND FALL—FROM AMERICA’S BRIGHTEST PRODIGY TO THE EDGE OF MADNESS (CROWN PUBLISHING)  
FRANK BRADY  
TSOA ’80, STEINHARDT ’91



Frank Brady declares in his introduction that although he knew the world champion Bobby Fischer since their youth, played hundreds of chess games against him, and was a close friend of the family, *Endgame* is a biography and not a memoir. To accomplish this, the author remains invisible in many scenes to which he was an eyewitness, electing to report the facts rather than his impressions. And so, Fischer’s infamous tale of unraveling—from a gifted Jewish boy growing up in Brooklyn to a raging anti-Semite and anti-American who died a recluse in 2008 in Iceland, the only country that would have him—is told with reverence for the genius that always lay beneath the pathology. As Brady writes: “Whether one admires or despises Bobby Fischer—and it’s quite easy to do both simultaneously...we should never forget his sheer brilliance on the chessboard.”

—Jason Hollander

THE AMERICAN WAY OF EATING: UNDERCOVER AT WALMART, APPLEBEE’S, FARM FIELDS AND THE DINNER TABLE (SCRIBNER)  
TRACIE McMILLAN  
CAS ’99



In this thoughtful debut, journalist Tracie McMillan explores firsthand just how our most basic need—to eat—is met, for better and for worse, in America. By working undercover in the fields of California’s Central Valley, at a Walmart in Detroit, and in a New York City Applebee’s, she pieces together the puzzle of how food is grown, distributed, stored, and served—and how money exchanges hands unequally along the way. The divide between foodies and those who resort to grocery shopping at liquor stores is no classist accident, she notes, but more likely a side effect of the industry’s pursuit of profit. Her challenge to readers: “How do we make a foodscape crowded with junk into an anomaly, and one flush with fresh, healthy food the norm?”

—Tate Morales

# A HOWL AND A HOOT

MARYROSE WOOD'S NOVELS OFFER WIT AND WISDOM TO YOUNG READERS

by Amy Rosenberg

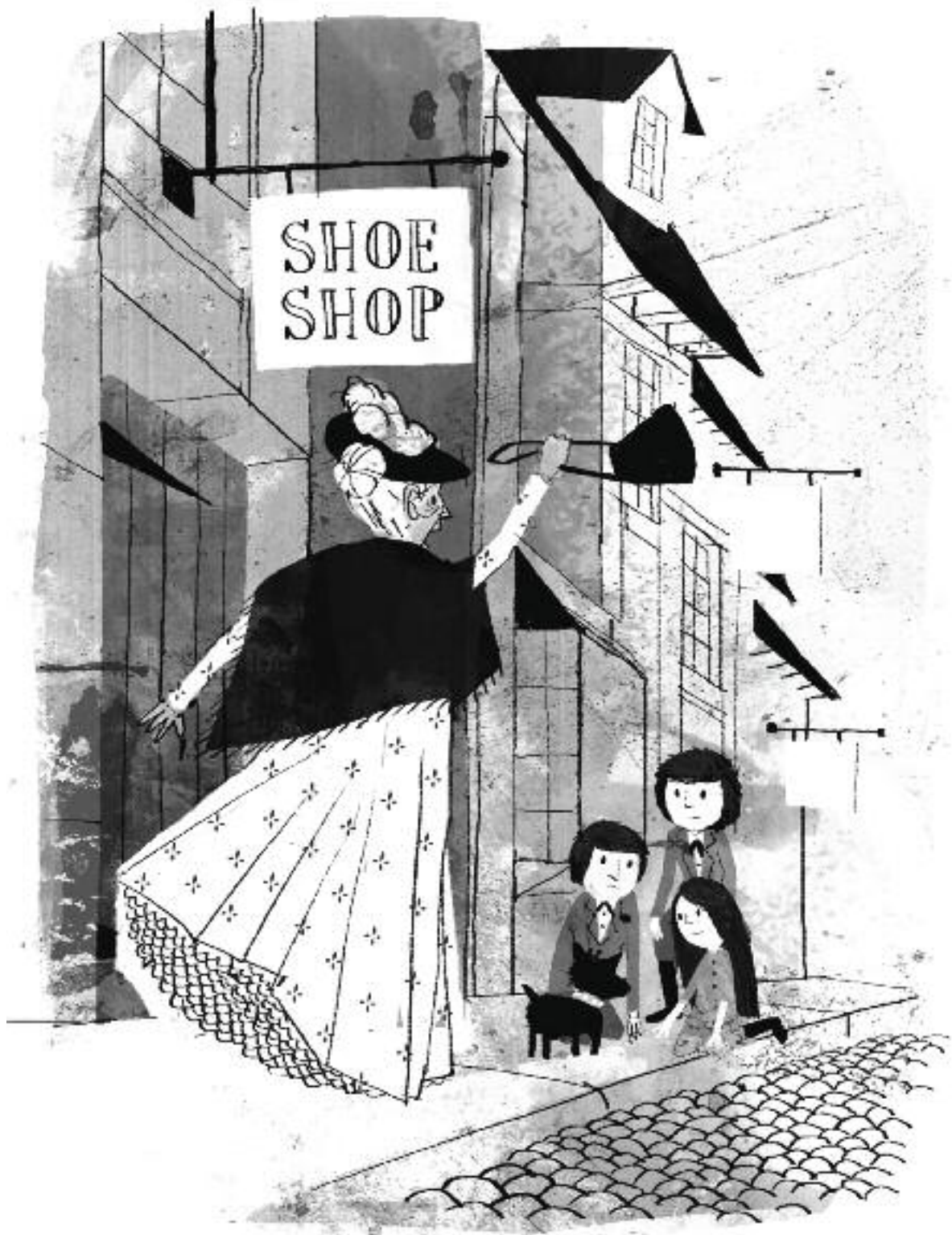


ILLUSTRATION COURTESY HARPERCOLLINS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

These days, there are few penniless 15-year-olds who leave school to become governesses at extravagant mansions in the English countryside. But there is Penelope Lumley, protagonist of *The Incurable Children of Ashton Place* (HarperCollins), a hilarious series of novels for young readers. A Victorian-era orphan who has spent her life at Agatha Swanburne's Academy for Poor Bright Females, Penelope is told one day by her beloved headmistress that she must leave to make room for another bright girl in need. She finds an appointment at, yes, an extravagant mansion, where the job description calls for, among other skills, a love of animals. When she arrives, she discovers why: Her three new charges have been raised in the woods by wolves. Penelope's mission is to educate them—after teaching them to speak instead of howl and to wear clothing.

It will come as no surprise that Maryrose Wood (GAL '96), creator of *The Incurable Children*, was inspired partly by *Jane Eyre*, her favorite book when she was a child. Like Jane, Penelope must make her way through an oppressive world, drawing on great inner strength to propel herself to security and happiness. But while *Jane Eyre* attended a school run by sadists who starved their pupils both physically and mentally, Penelope's strength derives in part from the nurturing aphorisms said to have originated with her alma mater's founder:

"One can board one's train only after it arrives at the station," for example; "All books are judged by their covers until they are read"; "There is no alarm clock like embarrassment." These "Swanburnisms," as Wood calls them, help to guide Penelope through a series of adventures with the children, and eventually to uncover a great mystery surrounding their origins—and her own as well.

Reading the books (three have been published so far; Wood anticipates six in the series altogether), it's easy to imagine Wood as something like Agatha Swanburne herself—wise, optimistic, gently authoritative, cheerfully hardworking—and that's a fairly accurate portrayal. Before writing the *Incurable* series, Wood, 50, wrote seven novels for teenagers, all acclaimed by the major children's book review publications

(Her 2008 book, *My Life: The Musical* [Delacorte], draws from those experiences.) She enrolled at NYU as an acting major, and before the end of her sophomore year had landed a role in the Stephen Sondheim musical *Merrily We Roll Along*. It was a "legendary flop," Wood recalls; nonetheless she dropped out of school in order to devote herself wholly to acting. It took nearly another decade before she realized that she was actually a writer at heart. So she reenrolled at NYU, and four years later, in her mid-thirties and a young mother, she had in hand a BA from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

For a while Wood stuck to screenplays and musicals, including *The Tutor*, which won the Richard Rodgers Award from the American Academy of Arts and

"Novels allow [children] to explore the possibilities of lives unlike their own—not to escape but to give them knowledge."

for their humor and "pitch-perfect narration." But she came to this career late in life; her first book was published only in 2006. That means that, with the publication of the latest *Incurable* volume, she'll have written 10 books in six years. "It took me a long time," she says, "but I finally understood that what I was interested in—critical questions about audience and meaning, and the techniques used to solve narrative problems—was the work of a writer."

Her first calling was the stage. A Long Island native, Wood had harbored dreams of acting on Broadway since adolescence, and spent much of her teenagehood stealing into the city to see any show she could get last-minute tickets for on the weekends.

Letters three years in a row. But when a friend convinced her to compose a novel for teenagers—her highly praised 2006 debut, *Sex Kittens and Horn Dawgs Fall in Love* (Delacorte)—she felt she'd found her true calling. "Teens and children have very little control over their lives," she says. "Novels allow them to explore the possibilities of lives totally unlike their own—not so much to escape their situations, but to give them knowledge." Wood, who now also imparts knowledge to would-be authors by teaching fiction writing at Lehman College in the Bronx, believes in the power of guiding her young audience with literature. "It's a way of helping to prepare them for the adult world," she says. "It's one thing *Jane Eyre* did for me." ■

## THE OTHER AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Although the wounds of slavery still play a profound role in American culture, Harvard University scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. spends much of his new book wrestling with that institution's legacy south of our borders: Of the 11.2 million Africans who survived the journey across the Atlantic, less than 5 percent ended up in the United States. In *Black in Latin America* (NYU Press), he notes that the "real" African-American experience, based on numbers alone, "unfolded...south of Key West, south of Texas, south of California." Some facts are unfortunately consistent across nations: The darkest Latin-Americans are disproportionately represented among the lowest economic rungs. However, other notions, such as Brazil's exhaustive list of categories of blackness, may boggle the American black-or-white mindset.

The following are Brazil's "133 shades" of blackness, from the book's appendix:

- |                    |                      |                   |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Acastanhada        | Clara                | Morena-escura     |
| Agalegada          | Clarinha             | Morena-fechada    |
| Alva               | Cobre                | Morena-jambo      |
| Alva escura        | Cor firme            | Morenã            |
| Alva rosada        | Cor-de-café          | Morena-parda      |
| Alvarenta          | Cor-de-canela        | Morena-roxa       |
| Alvarinta          | Cor-de-cuia          | Morena-ruiva      |
| Alvinha            | Cor-de-leite         | Morena-trigueira  |
| Amarela            | Cor-de-ouro          | Moreninha         |
| Amarela-queimada   | Cor-de-rosa          | Mulata            |
| Amarelada          | Corada               | Mulatinha         |
| Amarelota          | Crioula              | Negra             |
| Amorenada          | Encerada             | Negrita           |
| Avermelhada        | Enxofrada            | Pálida            |
| Azul               | Esbranquicento       | Paraíba           |
| Azul-marinho       | Escura               | Parda             |
| Baiano             | Escurinha            | Parda-clara       |
| Bem branca         | Fogoio               | Polaca            |
| Bem clara          | Galega               | Pouco clara       |
| Bem morena         | Galegada             | Pouco morena      |
| Branca             | Jambo                | Preta             |
| Branca-avermelhada | Laranja              | Pretinha          |
| Branca-melada      | Lilás                | Puxa para branca  |
| Branca-morena      | Loira-clara          | Quase negra       |
| Branca-pálida      | Loura                | Queimada          |
| Branca-queimada    | Lourinha             | Queimada de praia |
| Branca-sardenta    | Malaia               | Queimada de sol   |
| Branca-suja        | Marinhaira           | Regular           |
| Branquiça          | Marrom               | Retinta           |
| Branquinha         | Meio amarela         | Rosa              |
| Bronze             | Meio branca          | Rosada            |
| Bronzeada          | Meio morena          | Rosa-queimada     |
| Bugrezinha-escura  | Meio preta           | Roxa              |
| Burro quando foge  | Melada               | Ruiva             |
| Cabo verde         | Mestiça              | Russo             |
| Cabocla            | Miscigenação         | Sarará            |
| Café               | Mista                | Saraúba           |
| Café-com-leite     | Morena               | Specada           |
| Canela             | Morena bem chegada   | Tostada           |
| Canelada           | Morena-bronzeada     | Trigo             |
| Cardão             | Morena-canelada      | Trigueira         |
| Castanha           | Morena-castanha      | Verde             |
| Castanha-clara     | Morena-clara         | Vermelha          |
| Castanha-escura    | Morena cor-de-canela |                   |
| Chocolate          | Morenada             |                   |

LIST COURTESY NYU PRESS