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An Interview with Richard Rodriguez

Abstract

Richard Rodriguez grew up in California, the son of immigrant Mexican parents. He excelled academically, completed degrees at Stanford University and Columbia University, and was poised to continue in academia when he turned down offers from several prestigious schools, uncomfortable with the possibility that affirmative action gave him an unfair advantage. Rodriguez wrote about his early experiences in Catholic school and his assimilation to America in his first book, *Hunger for Memory*. Subsequent books, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, further explore issues of culture, race, and identity. Rodriguez has received the George Foster Peabody Award, the Frankel Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the International Journalism Award from the World Affairs Council of California. His work has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Rodriguez visited Butler University in the fall of 2011 as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers series and agreed to interview with *Booth's* Susan Lerner.

Keywords

interview, writing, essays, nonfiction, fiction



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Susan Lerner

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Susan Lerner: Can you describe the path that led you into writing?

Richard Rodriguez: I was an accidental writer at the start. I was in graduate school, preparing to become a teacher of English—probably at the college level—when I found myself the uneasy beneficiary of affirmative action. Ultimately, I left the university (and abandoned my teaching plans) in protest against affirmative action. And it was only then—within the loneliness of my life outside the academy—that I felt impelled to write about what education had done to and for me (how it had changed my life) and living within the illogic of “the minority student” that I turned to write an intellectual memoir. My first book, *Hunger for Memory*, gave birth to the idea that I was a writer.

SL: In general, how do the ideas for your essays develop?

RR: Because I have been designated by critics and by bookstores as a “Hispanic writer,” I suppose I often find myself writing about matters to do with the United States and Latin America. (There is a venerable tradition of writers in Latin America—the very best writers—engaging in political and civic matters in their writing lives. I honor that tradition with my humble imitation.) Also, as a homosexual man, I am attracted to issues of sexuality, especially the lives of women in America. And, because (since September 11th) religion is now the largest issue of our time, I find myself writing about religion—its madness, its glory, its dangers and possibilities.

SL: Many writers think of nonfiction as a stultifying genre, one constrained by facts. In one of your previous interviews you commented that you consider fiction to be the constrained genre. Can you elaborate on this?

RR: I don't exactly think of fiction as a “constrained genre.” It is more simply that fiction is, for me, less intriguing than non-fiction. I read histories and biographies and memoirs and essays. I read some poetry. But I read almost no fiction now. And I write always within the unforgiving borders of non-fiction. As a writer I am interested in the ways that the poetic impulse can be utilized in our writing of issues we normally consign to the social sciences and to journalism. Can one write about illegal immigration as a (literary) writer? Can the religious conflicts in the world be rendered poetically? This attempt to blur the line between the literary and the non-fictional is what interests me now, and frees my hand.

SL: How does surprise come into play when you write?

RR: I suppose “surprise” enters the writing process for me when I revise and revise and revise. It’s a case of “How do I know what I think until I have written it down”. The surprises for me always reveal themselves in the process of writing and seeing a topic over and over until something that is appealing and new—a metaphor, a helpful insight, a lovely sentence—suddenly shines through.

SL: In one of your interviews you spoke about summoning writing – that it feels as if you’re a conduit, as if the words come to you as if they had been waiting in the ether for you to put them to paper. Can you talk about that?

RR: Yes. The most ancient notions of writing propose that the writer is more passive than active. The writer waits until the graces (or grace) flows through him. The writer awaits inspiration. The writing which Monday was so sluggish is suddenly free on Tuesday. How to explain it? St. Thomas Aquinas says that writing is a kind of prayer, leaving oneself open, utterly vulnerable, to inspiration or God. That feels right to me.

SL: When you’re writing how do you think about audience?

RR: I write for a number of audiences. I write sometimes for newspapers and magazines of various sorts. I have written for television and radio. And I write highly dense, literary essays. In each case, the possibilities for my prose depend on remembering my audience. If I am writing for a mass television audience obviously I am governed by rules of clarity and simplicity of diction (since most TV viewers will hear what I say but will not read my words). If I am writing a literary essay that will probably be read by a small number of readers, obviously I can experiment with writing of a denser sort.

SL: Can you talk about why you employ a mosaic-like structure for your essays, as opposed to a more traditional narrative?

RR: Basically, the narrative that interests me is the narrative of our thinking lives. Ideas take place in time and over time. I want to indicate to the reader the process of thinking, even more than I am interested in the conclusion of my thinking. Thought is always moving—changing,

deepening, contradicting itself, etc. That is the process I want to describe in my prose. There is no end to thought except death.

SL: Hunger of Memory has passages in which you vividly describe your memories of how the mumbled, undecipherable sounds of English slowly gained meaning. It is astounding to be able to, within those pages, witness your acquisition of language. Can you say more about those memories?

RR: I think the movement of sound to word is the great journey of our thinking lives. As we grow older, language becomes words. But isn't it curious? There remains in us a nostalgia for the time in our lives when words were sounds. So we turn to poetry often to remind us of how words often sound more than they mean. We turn to song, wherein the music of human voice renders words of secondary importance.

SL: Your writing about your early experiences with language, and the concepts of private and public languages, reminds me of how it is for me in synagogue. A large part of the appeal of synagogue has to do with Hebrew, the language I was taught in my Jewish middle school, and my nostalgia for its sounds. When I'm in synagogue I feel as if I'm part of something huge, something that predates me, and will continue long after I die. Because I learned this private language, I'm included in something that's larger than the sum of the individuals. What are your thoughts on language and inclusion, and the functions of public and private language?

RR: Yes, you should write about this. The value and power of an exclusive private language that is also public is so interesting to me. The only experience I would compare with what you are saying is my experience as a schoolboy and an altar boy with Latin. The Latin mass was the great joy of my young life, not newfound American English. Latin connected me with the Church universal, and also with generations long dead. Colloquial English by contract "only" connected me with the living. Latin separated me from Walt Disney and Elvis Presley, but it connected me with ancient Rome.

SL: You cover an enormous expanse of material in a single essay. For instance the first few pages of your essay "Late Victorians" covers gay pride parades, the relationship between the geography of San Francisco and the different meanings people attach to the city, Victorian architecture in the context of the socio-economic history of San Francisco, and the beginning of

Lerner: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez
the AIDS epidemic. In the first few pages of your essay "Peter's Avocado," you travel from the moralistic underpinnings of vegetarianism, to hate crimes, to American history. Can you talk about the process of constructing essays from material so disparate?

RR: This gets back to what I was saying earlier: A great deal of our thinking life consists of random and oddly connected insights and opinions. What I was writing about in "Late Victorians" was the fabric of the civic life, under the stress of an epidemic. So architecture and gyms and Elizabeth Taylor all make an appearance, because they all deepened by season of thinking about César, while he was dying.

SL: *Your work is so inextricably tied to place, whether to your parents' Mexico in Hunger of Memory or the myriad neighborhoods in San Francisco you discuss, such as the Sino-Russian Richmond (where I grew up!), or the Sacramento of your childhood. Can you talk about how place informs your essays?*

RR: I believe the writer should admit to himself and to his reader that he inhabits a body. As I say somewhere, the only subject of writing—any writing—is telling the reader what it feels like to be alive. So I tell people about the apartment building on Clay Street where I live. I tell people about upper Fillmore. I tell readers about the places in Jerusalem or London I see and know. What worries me now (as I say in my Harper's essay "Final Edition" about the demise of the *San Francisco Chronicle*) is that a whole generation is losing a sense of place, exchanging place for a global sensibility that is free of place and time. This is very worrisome from a number of points of view. One: I think those young people I see on Fillmore Street, texting and ignoring people around them, are actually living lives without a sense of what it means to be walking on Fillmore Street—they are less sexy and less vital, accordingly.

SL: *During your reading at Butler, which focused primarily on Brown, it was striking to see how important the concept of brown is to you, and how important it is to you to convey these ideas. Where did your passion for this subject come from, and how did you come to write about it?*

RR: I should say that as an American, I was always attracted to "black" literature and to the drama of skin color among African-Americans. The notion of the "one drop" negro very early alerted me to the erotic content

of skin color and why it was such an explosive thing in America for an African- American to call himself “brown.” Also, as a dark-skinned Mexican American, and a *mestizo* (of mixed race), I grew up aware of the meaning of color in my own family. My brownness was the mark of my connection to the indigenous Indian who stares at me in the mirror. Everything else about my ancestry—my Spanish tongue, my Roman Catholicism—connected me to Spain. But my dark skin was my connection to the Americas.

SL: How do you feel about the attention your work has garnered, and that critics’ comments sometimes speak more about the racial issues you raise than your work’s literary merit?

RR: This is devil’s trade-off. I am read. I am published. I have a place on the library shelf. I am included. But, as I say in *Brown*, the price of inclusion is segregation. In general, I am not considered a serious writer by the crowd of critics in New York who tend to write about themselves or their neighbors in Brooklyn or in the Tri—State area or in London. Nothing is perfect. Life is a puzzle. In sum, I have less to complain about than many writers whose work is never published or never reviewed.

SL: Early in your career you declined offers from universities, feeling you had an unfair advantage because of affirmative action. What are your feelings about universities now, and how did it feel to visit Butler?





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RR: I have mixed feelings about everything. When I am invited to a school, I want to know (as much as I can) about whom else has been invited to speak in the series or in the program. If it seems too blatantly a case of affirmative action, I tend to stay away. But in the case of Butler, where several faculty members assured me that I was regarded as a serious writer, I believed them, and I came.

SL: At your reading you mentioned you're working on a book about Abrahamic religions and their relationship to the desert. Can you talk about the ideas driving this book, and why they compel you?

RR: September 11th shocked my sense of religion—how dangerous is the power we humans assume when we say “We belong to God”. For a long time, as a Christian, I was interested in Judaism, and had lectured in yeshivas and before Jewish audiences on the debt that I feel as a Christian to Judaism and to the example of Jewish belief. But until September 11th, I barely thought about Islam or even about my possible blood tie to Muslims through the several centuries of Spanish Islam.

My interest in Islam took me into the desert. And it was there, thinking about Abraham (the father of all three monotheistic religious traditions) that I started wondering about the impact of the desert ecology on the

experience of God for the Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim. After all, the first Abraham story is a desert story about an old man (who is dry) and suddenly promised a child by Sarah.

SL: Can you talk about what it's like to look back on yourself as a writer – how you feel your writing has changed over the years, how you've changed, and how the two are connected?

RR: I think my writing style in my “high” literary essays has gotten more complex. But I think my journalism has grown richer as I have come to trust the “common reader” more. I think, in this age of connection by I-machines, we are very hungry for ideas. In fact, there is very little thinking going on, just a lot of people texting messages to one another and blogging. The trick for writers will be in finding ways of seducing an audience, getting readers to slow down and read closely and slowly.

Susan Lerner, a pharmacist, is completing her MFA at Butler University while tending to her three teenagers. She is published or forthcoming in *Staccato Fiction*, *JMWW*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Foundling Review* and elsewhere. She posts book reviews at <http://booklerner.blogspot.com>.

Page 2 of 2 « Previous 1 2 Next »

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« Previous Post Next Post »

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