

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

The *Boom* Interview

California soul

It's hard to read Richard Rodriguez's essays and books without feeling that there is something deeply Californian about them. Every one of his books—*Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, *Days of Obligation: Arguments with My Mexican Father*, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, and *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*—takes place, at least in part, in California. Rodriguez has lived in California nearly all of his life. So what is it that now makes him say he once was but is no longer a California writer? There is something world-weary in the statement. Rodriguez has seen too much of the world in California, and perhaps too much of California in the world. At his writing table in his apartment in San Francisco, Rodriguez spoke with *Boom* about California's soul, why he is no longer a California writer, what's the matter with his hometown, San Francisco, these days, and love.

Boom: In your last book, *Brown*, and in your new book, *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*, you write about your friendship with the late Franz Schurmann and his book *American Soul*. Could one write about a California soul?

Rodriguez: I don't know. That's a really good question. I do think that I tended to read California as a Midwesterner. I had conflicting images of California. One was my uncle from India. The others were my parents from Mexico and the Irish nuns, to whom I dedicate *Darling*. They were almost all foreign people who had come to California.

But when I was a newspaper boy for the *Sacramento Bee*, everybody on that route or at least the majority, I would say, was from the Midwest. I would collect their subscription money—I think it was \$2—every month. I would be at the door, and the lady would say, “Is it cold outside?” I said, “It's freezing out here.” She said, “Oh, honey, that's not freezing. If you want freezing, go to Iowa. This isn't freezing. It's a little

BOOM: The Journal of California, Vol. 4, Number 1, pps 24–35, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2014 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2014.4.1.24.



chilly out here. Why don't you wait in the hallway?" So I had an experience through her eyes.

So I guess I had a Midwestern soul as I was growing up, and a sense of relief for living here, but a sense of wonder, because I didn't see snow until I was about twenty-two years old. I had never seen snow, except in the movies. The Central Valley of California got very hot, but it was also life giving—agriculture everywhere. You could smell the burning in the fields in the autumn, and at the State Fair at the end of summer, almost as a climax of summer before school started, there was a central pavilion, which of course was torn down, in which every county contributed agriculture. Tehama County. The agriculture products of Tehama—I don't even know whether I've been to Tehama County even to this day—were beautifully displayed. It was so beautiful to see that California, that benevolent California, and

even a place like Los Angeles was contributing lemons to the fair, you know. You didn't see Lana Turner. You saw lemons. I knew that I was related to that place. And the *Sacramento Bee* used to have on Saturday a special section with agricultural news. It was called "Superior California," and I did not understand what that was, whether it was superior in the sense that we were better than other Californians or what. I found out later from my brother it just meant Northern California.

Well, did I have a California soul in those years? I guess I did. When I came to Los Angeles, which I discovered after having been in London, I discovered a city that suited me. It suited me in the sense that I liked all of it. I found its architecture reminded me of Sacramento a great deal, and somebody would tell me, "Well, this little house, this little bungalow cost \$2 million." I would find it amusing. It's like

the bungalow I grew up in, except once you went inside, of course, they tarted it all up and so forth.

LA seemed to me both the combination of something I knew in Sacramento and then not. And the *not* was Mexico. It was filled with Mexico. Mexico was teeming around me. And the people, you know. Coming out of a breakfast in Santa Monica, this skinny kid would come up to me and start talking Spanish and say he just arrived. He would ask me for impossible directions. I had no idea how to get to Tarzana. I didn't even know where Tarzana was, because my LA was so limited. And then in the middle of all this kind of blond, bleached, muscular, exercised, gaudy, glamorous Santa Monica, there was this kid who was desperate. I couldn't manage it. I didn't know how to relate to him.

And then LA became more and more a city that in my imagination became more Mexican and more a desert city. I felt the proximity of desert. By that, I mean metaphorically desert, a city of want.

The other California was Asian, and I feel that profoundly now in San Francisco. I don't know whether I've satisfactorily accommodated myself to Asia. I was talking to a mathematician last night about his students. He's a university professor. And he said 80 percent of the students in his math classes are Asians. And I said, "Why? What is that? Is it linguistic? Is there something about learning Mandarin that allows you to decipher mathematics more easily? Why

don't I have that?" And he said, "Well, I think I am seeing first-generation immigrants. I think I am seeing kids who are coming with such a sense of urgency to California that they will do anything. They don't fall asleep in my classes. They want to do more than I give them." I said, "But that's not an answer. There are a lot of first-generation immigrants around. There are Russians. There are Mexicans galore. Brazilians. There are Chechens. What are you telling me, that they're first generation? That doesn't tell me anything." I think the ambition of Chinese California is so lavish that it just dwarfs anything that we dreamt of as Gold Rush people. It is just this magnificent place.

Toward the end of his life, Franz Schurmann was of the opinion that America was in decline, but the American dream was quite alive. I saw an interview with a Vietnamese shopkeeper in San Jose once. His English was not very good, but because his shop was the shop that sold the winning Lotto number, he got a million dollars. The people who won the Lotto didn't come. They didn't want to be filmed, but he was more than willing to be filmed. And the state officials put "million dollar winner," or something, on a big banner outside. And they asked him, "Does the American dream exist?" And in Franzian tones, he said, "Yes, yes. I am the American dream."

Well, I think to myself, there is that. But you have a little Saigon in Orange County. And maybe in a generation, it won't be the case, but there is still the memory of tragedy so intense that it feels to me different in tone than the experience of Midwestern California that I experienced as a child. People who came from Kansas were not leaving, generally, tragedy behind. They were coming for a softer winter. That is very different from coming from a civil war where your father was killed, being a boat person off the coast of Southeast Asia. That experience of tragedy, of losing is just not characteristic of the California that I grew up in, and it feels more Mexican to me in the sense that you come here out of desperation, not to become a movie star, but to pick grapes.

I remember talking to these Mexicans at a really fancy house. Friends of mine up in Napa. They have a vineyard. And I just went wandering around one day, started talking to these Mexican guys about their lives. Their California was so basic and so unromantic. Even though they loved the landscape around them, and they thought this place, these vineyards were really beautiful, and they worried about the

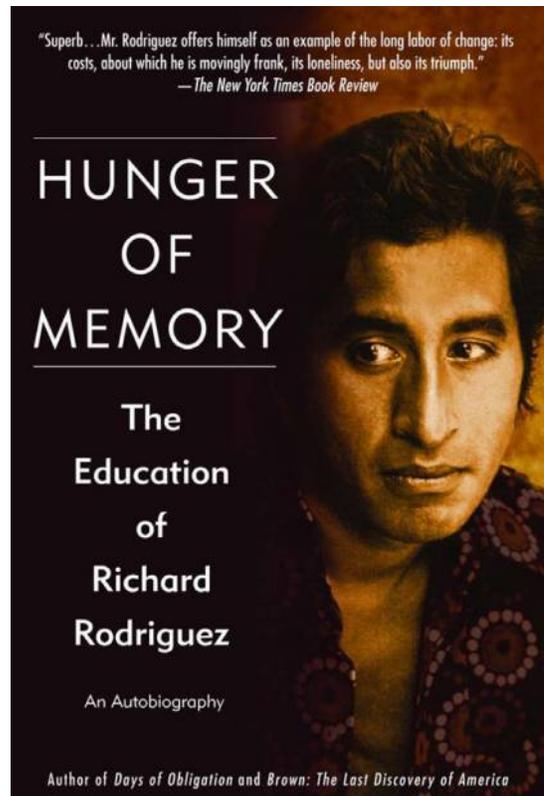


weather, they worried about the season; they did not, most of them, admit to drinking very much wine. They drank beer more easily. They recognized that they were within a culture, this kind of Tuscan California that was built by the very wealthy.

Once I went to the Mondavi mansion—it was on top of a hill—and the living room is a swimming pool. It's an Olympic-size swimming pool. And I thought why not? And I said to him, "This really is the most unusual house I've ever seen. This makes Versailles look like Potter's Field". And he said, "You know, there's no reason why you shouldn't enjoy your life to the full." Well, there's every reason. He was elegant and European, even though I think he was American-born, Robert Mondavi, but he was wealthy enough to indulge fantasy. And the thing about California, about this landscape, because it is so moderate a climate, is that you can build anything on it, and you can build a castle. You can build a pyramid. You can build anything on this landscape and it takes it.

And then it does take it, if you don't take care of it. I gardened as a kid. As a teenager, I worked with this guy. Jan was his name. I liked the sexual ambiguity of his name. Jan was a woman's name to me, but there he was. This is a young man. I thought he was an old guy. He must have been late thirties, early forties. I had worked with him on weekends and summers till my mother said I couldn't, because I was getting so dark-skinned, and it just terrified her, the harshness of nature. But he would take his shirt off. The sun was out, and Jan would take his shirt off. He had a wonderful torso in that fifties sort of way, but just naturally muscular. But there were these spots on his shoulders. And I didn't know about skin cancer. I mean, I knew but I didn't know, and I didn't know how to appraise his skin. I didn't know whether he was too light-skinned to be doing this to his skin. He would get very dark in the summer, a reddish brown. The last time I saw him in Sacramento—this was many years ago, but his skin had just turned to a kind of—it turned into my wallet. And then I knew that California would take its toll. And California would not forgive. And California would remember everything you did in the sun, as it reminds me. There is nothing you did that day, carefree you in the California sun, that California doesn't remember.

So did I live in California? Yes. But I don't know which one, and I've lived in several, and now I live in the Chinese



"I write very slowly because I write under the obligation to make myself clear to someone who knows nothing about me. It is a lonely adventure. Each morning I make my way along a narrowing precipice of written words. I hear an echoing voice—my own resembling another's. Silent! The reader's voice silently trails every word I put down. I reread my words, and again it is the reader's voice I hear in my mind, sounding my prose . . .

I have come to think of myself as engaged in writing graffiti. Encouraged by physical isolation to reveal what is most personal; determined at the same time to have my words seen by strangers. I have come to understand better why works of literature—while never intimate, never individually addressed to the reader—are so often among the most personal statements we hear in our lives. Writing, I have come to value written words as never before. One can use *spoken* words to reveal one's personal self to strangers. But *written* words heighten the feeling of privacy. They permit the most thorough and careful exploration. (In the silent room, I prey upon that which is most private. Behind the closed door, I am least reticent about giving those memories expression.) The writer is freed from the obligation of finding an auditor in public. (As I use words that someone far from home can understand, I create my listener. I imagine her listening.)"

city that's populated with kids who are making billions of dollars by distracting us from our reality. So, yes.

Boom: Do you think of yourself as a California writer?

Rodriguez: No, I don't think so anymore. I used to.

I have almost no relationship to Los Angeles, for example. I have friends in LA, and I go to LA. I had a good time in LA. But I have no relationship to the city anymore. It just seems either uninteresting to me or uninterested in me, which might be the same thing. So, for example, I've never lectured at UCLA. I've never lectured at USC. I'm giving a lecture on *Darling* at Loyola University in February. It's very rare. It almost never happens. I haven't been on an LA radio or TV station for twenty years. So I don't exist in that city.

Darling has had all of its success on the East Coast. It's really quite amazing. I don't have any relationship to LA. It just doesn't exist for me. It doesn't exist in my life. So that if I get an invitation for an interview, it's usually Boston. Or Providence, Rhode Island, will review *Darling*, or Buffalo, New York, will review *Darling*, and not Seattle, not Fresno, not San Diego. And the *LA Times* is tepid.

So if you ask me about LA, I just don't belong there anymore. I know that sounds petulant but it's just I'm more often in New York than I am in LA now, and I live a lot of my imaginative life in London, for whatever reason. I'm in London a great deal. And I'm very much interested in the death of Europe, the reverse of Europe right now. When



I come back to America, this country seems exhausted. I think this war between the conservatives and the liberals is just deadly. It's the death rattle.

I think what changed me, too, and what made me an old man was AIDS. I helped a lot of guys die in those years, a lot of guys. So I really got burned out. There are characters in some British novels who survived the First World War and who end up walking in Piccadilly, and they're in the swim of the crowd, but they're wasted. They're just not there. I went through a period like that after that many deaths. I couldn't go to a funeral. I just couldn't. I couldn't do all of that anymore. But I could do some things. I knew when to call your mother and when to say this sounds like it's going to be tonight, and if you're going to come, you should come now. I knew that. I knew how to give you morphine, not to give you too much, but give you enough. I knew how to hold your hand. I knew what to say to you. I knew how to make you less afraid.

Well, from all of that, even now in this city—I'm going to start crying, but even now, I can't go to certain places in the city without thinking, "Oh, that's where Tom or that's where Will spent that last year," or hospitals, so many hospitals.

When my parents died a few years ago, it was nothing. It was like the coming of autumn. It was the most normal experience. But to see that much youth cut down. And the celebration of hedonism sort of ended in California that way. That really did change a lot of things, and I became very, very tragic. That whenever I would see this car crash, two kids die, I thought, oh, there's youth cut down again.

Even now in the Castro District. I go to this gym in the Castro. There's death everywhere for me there. It's really treacherous. I have to be really careful not to walk by it too much, but it's there, and so that was my California too. And I met people from all over the world in those years who thought they had come to paradise. That motif—that we had found a place of bliss and freedom with a temperate sky—was so large in my rendition of California. I grew up in a destination for so many people, and so many of those people I knew had died. It really changed a great deal. I can't say too much about that, because it really was profound, but at a level in which it sounds maudlin to say it now, you know?

Boom: Yes. When you travel around the world and tell people you're from California, how do they react now?

Rodriguez: Oh, they still react with a great deal of interest. California is its own country. It's its own mythology. I saw a survey recently of young teenagers in China and the place in America they would most want to visit. And Mountain View was on top.

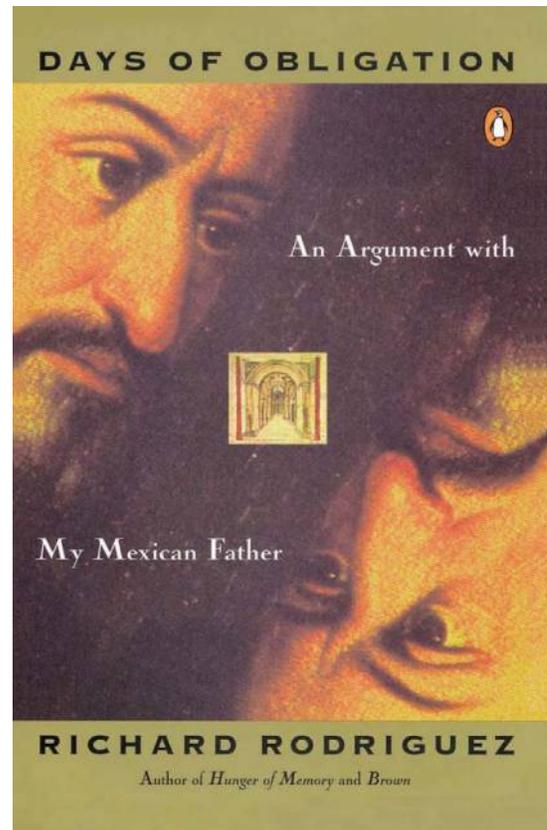
My closest friend was once the mayor of Mountain View. She was really wonderful. There's a little street by the city hall named after her, and she loved Mountain View. It was just at the point in which Mountain View was becoming Mountain View. She came from Long Beach, and she was passionate about kids at Crittenden, the junior high school where she was a teacher and a counselor. That was the same school that Steve Jobs went to, but Steve Jobs was so overwhelmed with the sense of black and brown at Crittenden that he got his parents to move him out of the school. They moved to Los Altos. Steve Jobs the great cosmopolite, the great internationalist, could not deal with brown and black California in Mountain View.

Well, Marcie, my friend, taught there, and she loved those kids. She was a real Californian. So when I see someone say that's the place they want to go to, I think, "Oh, I misjudged Mountain View. It's really that interesting." I guess, in a way, it is interesting that all of that happens there.

I go to the gym and I come back to my apartment about 6:30, and as I get to these neighborhoods, the big buses are going by. They're dark-windowed and very, very gleaming buses going to the suburbs. That already is interesting that there are kids of the suburbs who made huge fortunes in the suburbs who would prefer to live in the city, even one that's as false as San Francisco, as unreal as San Francisco. And at some expense of their time, they are taking these buses. Presumably, they are wired in these buses, so they can work. And there is no destination on the marquee of the bus. It's just floating through these neighborhoods.

Boom: A lot of people seem very concerned about the change that those buses signal in San Francisco. Do you share those concerns?

Rodriguez: No, because I've always loved wealth. I've loved being around it. And if I knew you were wealthy, I would have made friends with you in grammar school. I knew the house where Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan lived in Sacramento, because I played there. I knew those people. I knew all the people on that block. They went to school with



"The comedy of California was constructed on a Protestant faith in individualism. Whereas Mexico knew tragedy.

My Mexican father, as his father before him, believed that old men know more than young men; that life will break your heart; that death finally is the vantage point from which a life must be seen.

I think now that Mexico has been the happier place for being a country of tragedy. Tragic cultures serve up better food than optimistic cultures; tragic cultures have sweeter children, more opulent funerals. In tragic cultures, one does not bear the solitary burden of optimism. California is such a sad place, really—a state where children run away from parents, a state of pale beer, and young old women, and divorced husbands living alone in condos. But at a time when Californians are driven to despair by the relentless optimism of their state, I can only marvel at the comic achievement of the place, California's defiance of history, the defiance of ancestors.

Something hopeful was created in California through the century of its Protestant settlement. People believed that in California they could begin new lives. New generations of immigrants continue to arrive in California, not a few of them from Mexico, hoping to cash in on comedy."

me. My trick was to know your mother, because I knew that if I ingratiated myself to your mother, if I was very polite, if I was invited to lunch or dinner, remarked on how good the lunch was, that she'd invite me back. She'd say, "Who is that nice little boy?" And the kid was not interested in me, with two exceptions. There's one kid who died of an oversized heart. He taught me to listen to Frank Sinatra. I thought that's what rich people listened to, because he loved jazz.

I love rich people, and so I love them at the market, these impossibly beautiful Indian women who obviously have money. The way I used to go to the food market in Brentwood and I would love seeing rich people shopping. The way I would watch Fred Astaire walking up to communion. It's just interesting how they deal with it, their impatience standing in lines, their bratty children, their beauty, their anxieties, their loneliness, their glamour, the sound of their car doors shutting, which doesn't sound anything like my Honda. It interests me. It's like living in London in the eighteenth century, a place of people with such enormous wealth living among people who don't have that wealth.

Look at the lines of people when there's a Lotto of any magnitude. This is my American character. I'm not threatened by great wealth. I'm interested in it, not that I will have it for myself, not that I even want it, though I have a lot of charities that I'd like to give money to. I don't have enough money. But there's so much want. Gosh, just so much, and



so many food banks, so many libraries and teachers and organizations, school districts that don't have anything, scholarship funds.

And then when I see somebody go buy a Lamborghini or a Bentley—I saw this woman in a Bentley the other day, caught in traffic as I was, and she was distracted. And when a beautiful woman is distracted, she can be even more beautiful. But I thought, oh, I wonder where she's been or where she's going, and that interested me. And I was happy to live in this city. I was happy to live in the city.

You know, there is a Virginia Woolf novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the main character is walking up Bond Street, and a royal goes by in a Rolls Royce, and she only sees the arm holding the little support by the window. And there's speculation about who it is, a prince, princess, or even indeed the king, and the traffic sort of gives way. Well, when I see these buses, I know they don't live in my world, and yet they do. I mean, they live up the block, and so, of course, it interests me.

I walk home from the gym, up Fillmore, and for two blocks, we're in the projects. And for one block where there is a police station, there is also a congregation of young males, black males, and obviously drug traffic. And the persistence of white gentrification is such now that white people walk through this like it doesn't exist. It's really thrilling to me that the people can be that oblivious and protectedly oblivious too. You don't make eye contact with these people.

But the other day, there was a shootout. This was at four in the afternoon, on a Saturday afternoon. A kid was dragged out of a car, and he ran. And then right in front of a restaurant—we're getting just to the edge of gentrification—here were gunshots. I was petrified. I didn't even think to go behind a telephone pole. I was just watching—bang, bang, bang! And then he runs toward the Safeway parking lot. By that time, the police sirens are sounding, four in the afternoon, a clear, bright day. The odd thing about the sound of the gunfire is that it brings out people. It brings out kids. They're suddenly coming out of the projects to see what's going on, whereas, the old people, are going into the coffee shop to get away from it all. The kids make a run for it, and the cops chase after them. This is within two minutes of the event.

One kid, as he's running away, sees me watching, and we hold each other's glance for a second. It is really intense, and then he runs past.

I live in that. I live along that Fillmore too, and then in three or four blocks, normalcy has established itself. Within five blocks, we are safely within the yuppie precinct, and it is impossible that that just happened. That's very interesting to me.

You know, one of the things that is happening in the world right now is that increasingly people are going to restaurants that are in dangerous neighborhoods. In Tijuana, Mexico, for example, there's a new, very experimental, kind of nouveau something in neighborhoods that I would consider too dangerous to go to. And there are beautiful people going to those restaurants. I do not understand. My nephew, who has a number of restaurants in Oakland, he's a great believer in being edgy and taking good food to the edge of safety. I don't know what that is. I find it really interesting.

The relationship of sexuality to criminality, I lived with for many years until we became legal. But the relationship of food now to criminality is really interesting to me, and the proximity of those two realities in our lives is interesting. At the same time that food is advertised as being extremely healthy and in portions that are not overwhelming, there is this possibility that you'll be killed when you go back to your car.

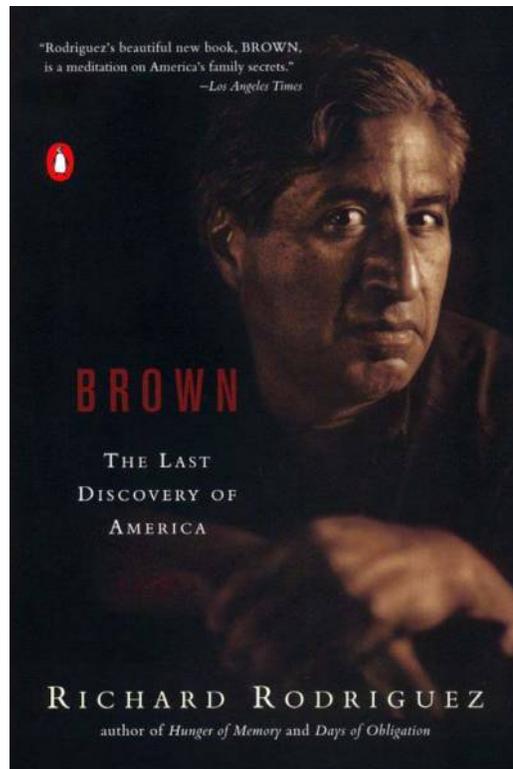
Boom: Your new book, *Darling*, is filled with love, as the title implies. What has been California's role, San Francisco's role, in changing how we think about love?

Rodriguez: Well, the City of Love. We replaced Philadelphia briefly. Come to San Francisco for the eternal summer.

I want to say several things.

When I wrote *Brown*, I was quite struck with how much lovemaking there is in America that never gets described. Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson and their descendants cannot be buried to this day in the Jefferson family plot. I mean, we are given American history, and we are told this is American history, but it's a compilation of hatred, of these wars, of that disagreement, of that shooting, that assassination. That's American history. The Civil War, those young men dead in Gettysburg.

Then there will be these family stories about a love affair, and you will see these people, this Italian immigrant sitting in a family of black people in North Carolina, and you wonder who in the hell is he. Where did he come from? How does he work? Well, in my family, this blond lady starts



“What the United States might give Latin America is a more playful notion of culture. Culture as freedom. Culture as invitation. Culture as lure. Already, the definitive blond in Latin America is Ricky Martin. Ricky Martin is so blond he can afford to be brunette.

Only further confusion can save us. My favorite San Francisco couple is a Chinese-American man and an African-American woman who both have blond hair and wear Hawaiian shirts and ride around town in a vintage red Pontiac convertible with white leather upholstery. The use of vegetable hair dyes is a great boon to American youth, wouldn't you say? Sun wonderfully false colors allow young Americans to be and not to be. Blue or chartreuse or Lucille Ball. And at the same time to proclaim themselves to be just kidding. And contact lenses. My niece has dyed her hair red and thinks she might like to try blue eyes for a change. Nothing permanent. It all washes out. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

Ding-dong. It's the UPS man. The Filipino guy in shorts, his hair just beginning to magenta at the temples. Home, as I said, is a Victorian in San Francisco with Indians stomping around on the roof. And I am left (on such a nice day, too) sitting inside, deconstructing the American English word for myself—Hispanic [*sic*—by which I celebrate my own deliverance from *cultura*; the deliverance of the United States of American from race.”

showing up at our family Christmases who is always with my uncle's nephew. He's very political in San Francisco. I know that. And my first vision of him was with an Adlai Stevenson tie. And then I find out that they got married. And that woman, the blond lady, is there in the middle of all these Mexicans and Indians because—my mother's words in Spanish—they fell in love. And I realized what this explosive thing is, this love. This takes you places where you never know where you're going.

So I know there is something brewing in me, this little emotion brewing in me, which can get me killed, you know, if I ask the wrong guy, if I say to the wrong guy, you know, "I'd like to be your friend." So you learn not to say anything.

It becomes almost this story that just shatters me, because you would hear these people, a little church in South Carolina that gets burned down, the minister and priest, and they all gather around. We talk about hate crimes. I think to myself why don't we talk about love crimes in America, how people are killed for falling in love, or how people are destroyed because they fall in love, how people are put in jail for falling in love, how even glancing at her for a black man could get you lynched in America, you know. Let's talk about love crimes. That's what I want to say first of all about love, just how explosive it is and how unruly.

And I guess what I want to say now in the world is that I don't understand a lot of what goes on. I remember as an altar boy—because I used to go to lots of funerals and lots of

weddings, what I knew as an altar boy in my Catholic church, a beautiful church, still is—was that if the groom or the bride weeps during the service, it will usually be the groom. It will not be the bride. What I also knew at funerals is that if anybody weeps at a funeral, it will be several rows back. It usually won't be in the front row, because they had to clean the shit, and they know what a blessing death is.

Anyway, I guess what I feel right now is there is this enormous disconnect between men and women in our society. And what I was struck by at an early age as a young man in Los Angeles and then in Northern California is the fact that at a time in which there was this gay liberation going on and my gay friends told me about all this sex they were having, it was kind of a carnival. I wasn't having any. Men were not interested in what I was selling, but women were, and I developed a number of relationships with women, two of which were sexual, but all of which were very deep—the darling in the book in Los Angeles being one of them. Many of these women were married. A number of them had been married several times or divorced, and there was a relationship that we had, a sardonic gay man with a thrice-married divorcee, that was really interesting, partly because we regarded men with some chagrin and partly because—a lot of my straight friends will say, "Well, the reason you knew so many women was because you were free of this animal urge," you know, that we could be friends. We could have conversations. We could look in each other's eyes and not seduce each other into a hotel room. I think there was some of that, but surely, I would say to my friends that you have that relationship with a sister. You are not driven by a sexual urge—or with your mother, presumably, although Freud might disagree. But I think there was always that odd relationship, and it's one that we satirize as we were the interior decorators that they would call upon to decorate their houses because their husbands didn't care, and we would furnish their houses, or we would cut their hair, the salon in Beverly Hills, or we would take them to lunch. Nancy Reagan had one, you know, because we would amuse them. We could tell them stories when their husband had nothing to say.

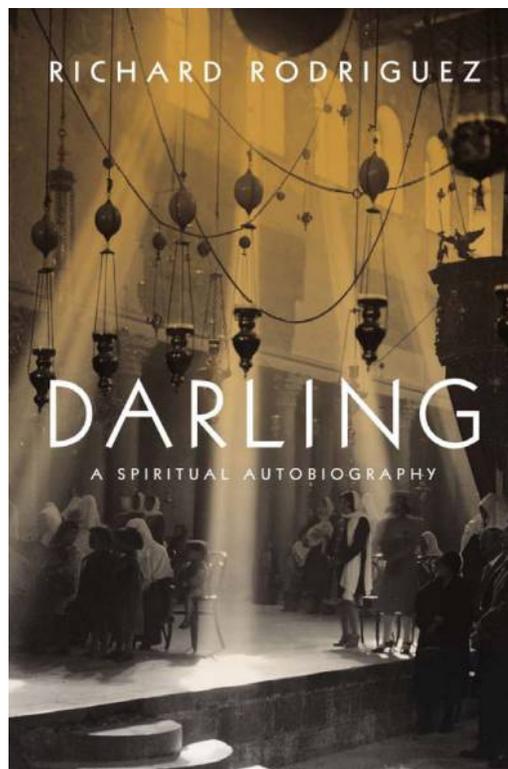
I developed quite early this relationship with women, so that I began to hear these stories about their unhappiness, and increasingly, this ambition to be Ms., to be judged not as somebody's wife or even as somebody's mother, just to be judged in a civic life as my own woman. And it really did



lead me to the conclusion, which now I believe, that my emancipation came from women—came from heterosexual women, that the suffrage movement in Europe, which extends into the early twentieth century in America, the desire of women to leave the parlor and to march down the great streets of Europe and America to demand the vote, demand in the public realm equality with a male is astonishing, because here are women who do not want to be, as they're going to a ballot box, somebody's wife or somebody's mother. They may be both, and that may be the motive in their vote, but they are being judged as essentially a woman in their own right. That freedom it seems to me preexists the gay liberation movement, which is casually and stupidly referred to as the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, which were a wonderful sort of refusal to kowtow to the police and to demand the freedom of one's own leisure in the night. But the decision of women to seek out freedom in the city apart from their relationships at home, I think it's the beginning of something that is really quite astonishing.

And that taught me to see that the women I knew as my teachers, the nuns, who were as covered up as Arabic women now—never saw their arms, never saw their hair, never saw their necks, they were completely covered—that was their freedom. And when they begin to emerge in nineteenth century Europe, they are the first women who are allowed to do that, precisely because they are like this. The burka becomes their freedom essentially, and they are able to open hospitals, run hospitals, open schools. When they come to San Francisco, they are able to do things that no one can do. And the local anti-Catholic newspaper says, "We don't want you here. You're whores." What are they doing here? They are sleeping at the back of St. Patrick's Church on Mission Street because there is no place for them. They are remembered on the north side of the State Capitol. There is a monument to them, those Sisters of Mercy. These were vulnerable women, and the only reason for their decline is they became influential, and they essentially created generations of women, like my mother, who would follow them, who would become educated—my mother didn't—but who would get jobs outside of the family, who would learn skills, who would in the end, as my mother did, earn more money than their husbands and so forth.

The dynamic of male-female relationships is so strained now by that assurance that women have in the world, even



"Americans have been promised—by God, by the Constitution of the United States, by Edna Ferber—that we shall enjoy liberty to pursue happiness. The pursuit constitutes what we have come to call the American Dream.

Americans feel disappointment so keenly because our optimism is so large and is so often insisted upon by historians. And so often justified by history. The stock market measures optimism. If you don't feel optimistic, there must be something wrong with you. There are pills for disappointment.

The California Dream was a codicil to the American Dream, an opening. Internal immigrants sought from California at least a softer winter, a wider sky; at least a thousand miles' distance between themselves and whatever dissatisfaction they felt with "home."

Midwestern California, the California of internal immigrants, was everywhere apparent when I was growing up—in the nervous impulse to build and to live in a house that had never been lived in or died in; where the old lady never spilled milk, the dog never died, the bully never lurked behind the elm tree; where widows and discomfited children never stared at the moon through runny glass, or listened to the wind at night. This California was created by newcomers from Illinois and Nebraska and it shaped my life. This was California as America's America."

You can sort of mute the power of love, but when it explodes, it explodes, and it is really something, really something.

when it's a job at Walmart that nonetheless pays more than the unemployed husband is getting right now. It already establishes a dynamic that we haven't worked into mythology of what a family feels like or looks like. I think that what women are doing right now feels like a negativity that's moving away from marriage, but you asked me about love, and there is an Israeli writer who I quote in the book who says, "You know, if God had come to Sarah saying, 'Give me your firstborn son. I want to kill him,' rather than to Abraham, she would have said, 'No way. There's no way you're going to take my kid to do whatever you are going to do on top of a mountain.'" A woman came up to me on Temple Square in Utah, in Salt Lake City, and she knew me from television. She wanted to talk about having a gay son, and she said, "You know, the church teaches me that God loves everything." It is a desert religion and the patriarch is there. "But then they want me to disown my son," she said, "I won't do it."

What I hear increasingly from women is this antagonism toward religion, what they called the patriarchal religions of the desert, and I am quite interested in that. What I am increasingly interested in is just the unruliness of love and how surprising it is, how unexpected, and how dangerous it is. I still think now that what love is, is so strong that we better get out Valentine cards and candy. We better put it at a distance, because it is really, really strong, and you give a society reasons to be distracted, easy sex, pornography, fast cars, and you can sort of mute the power of love, but when it explodes, it explodes, and it is really something, really something. That's what I think about love.

I think last of all, to understand this in the churches, I think they preach love all the time, but they have no idea what they are proposing. I remember the nuns used to warn us when we were little kids about the danger of mixed marriages, by which they meant marrying a Methodist or something. But then one could fall in love with someone not of one's kind, you know. That was in some way even more likely. So I'm walking up J Street—I must be about ten years old—with this secret looming in my chest that I am in love with the wrong sex, and I see this black man walking—this is in the late 1950s—hand-in-hand with this woman, this blond lady, who is really white. I mean really white and buxom. And I know enough to know that this is not safe. No one is going to lynch him in Sacramento, I think, but I want to protect them, because I know that this thing that they are doing is really risky. And there is California all around, you know, and we are all continuing on our way. Wow! California story.

So there are streets now in Irvine where there are children—children being born all over California, all over the world—who don't have a race and who belong to several races, and faces now in California that are so enchanting for being indescribable, unattributable. Yeah, that's pretty good. California cuisine. Pretty good. **B**

Notes

This interview was conducted and edited by Jon Christensen.

Portraits of Richard Rodriguez by Timothy Archibald.

© TIMOTHY ARCHIBALD.

