Regarding Mystery: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez

By David Michael
September 9, 2014
AT WORK

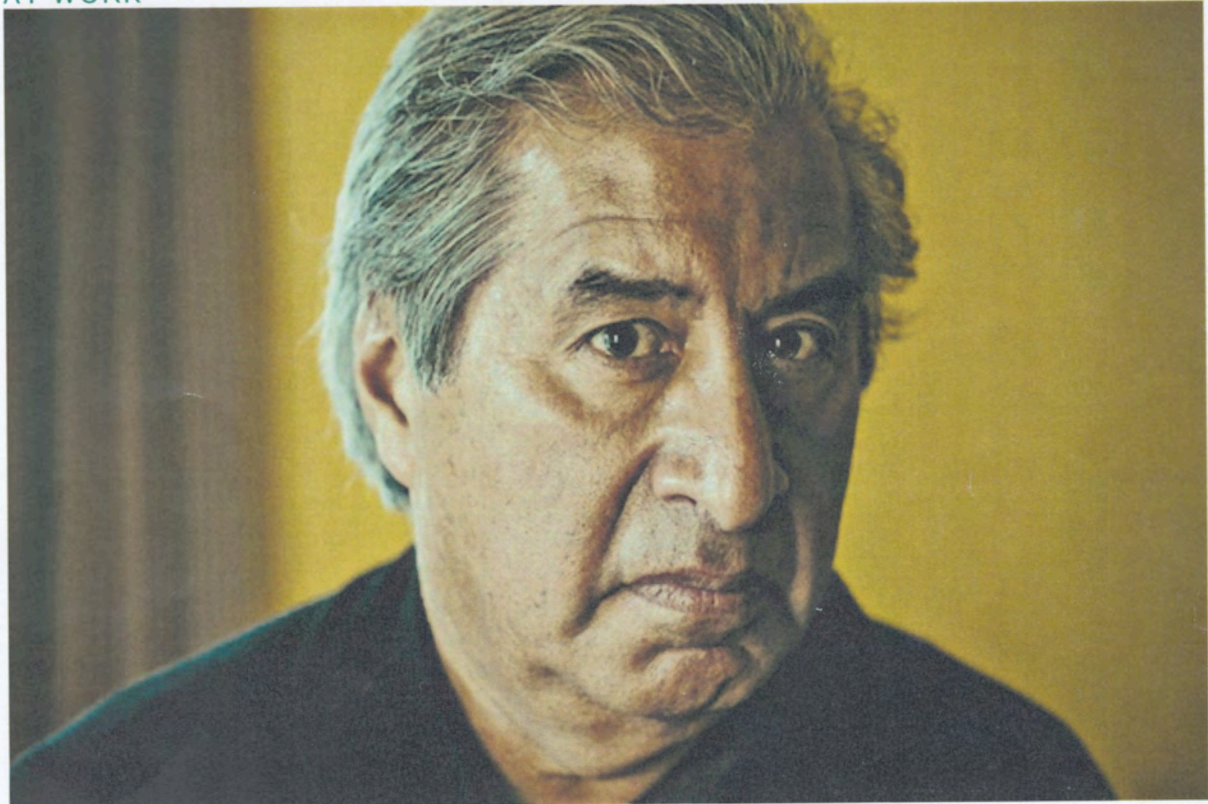


PHOTO: TIMOTHY ARCHIBALD

In San Francisco earlier this spring, I'd hoped to meet the essayist Richard Rodriguez, the author of The Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez, Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father, Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, and, most recently,* Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*, which has just been published in paperback. Though he's largely associated with his early stances against affirmative action and bilingual education, not*

to mention his regular appearances on the PBS NewsHour, *Rodriguez, who turned seventy in July, has had a wide-ranging career, and I wanted to discuss the shift of his work from cultural identity to religion. But our schedules were tricky to coordinate, and then I lost my wallet. "Pray to St. Anthony!" Rodriguez immediately wrote. (The wallet was recovered by one of the famous bellmen at Sir Francis Drake Hotel. "St. Anthony dressed as a beefeater," as Rodriguez put it.) Instead, we corresponded for several weeks.*

I was excited and surprised by *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*. I had seen you referred to as a Mexican-American writer, a Californian writer, and a gay writer, but never, until recently, as a religious writer. Have you always considered yourself a religious writer?

Of course, I haven't, until lately, considered myself a "writer"—in the grand sense. For most of my writing life, I have stood truly, if uneasily, on American bookstore shelves as a sociological sample—shelved "Latino" between a gangbanger's book of poetry and the biography of a Colombian drug lord. Only in recent years, as it has become clear to me that so few people I know read books, have I been struck by the fact that I am a writer.

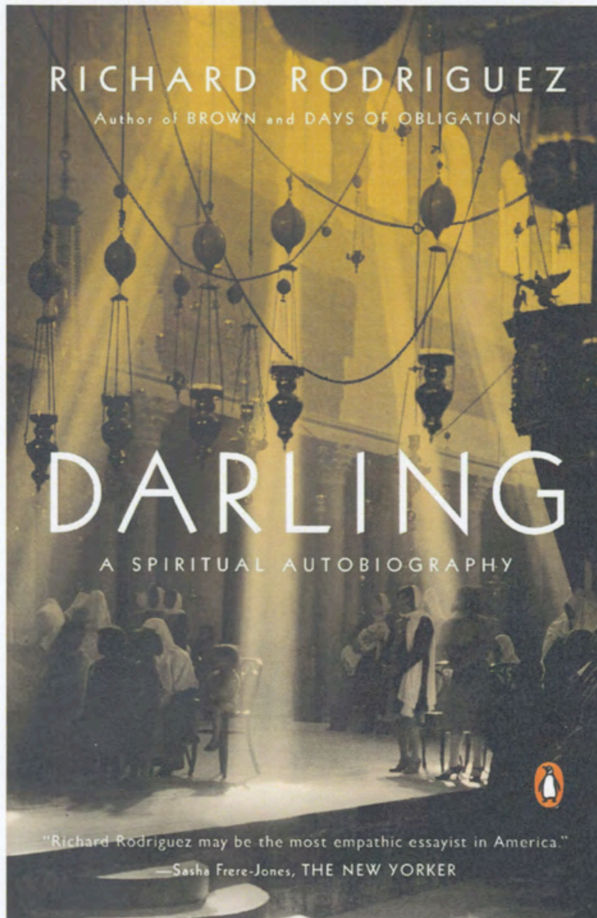
My sense of being religious is older. From boyhood, particularly my lower-middle-class childhood in Sacramento, I was transported by religion into the realm of mystery. Consider this: The Irish nun excused me from arithmetic class so that I could serve as an altar boy at a funeral mass. Along with the priest and the other altar boy, I would welcome Death at the doors of the church. We escorted Death up the main aisle. I later went with the cortege to the cemetery. There was a fresh pile of soil piled high at the edge of the grave site, discreetly, if unsuccessfully, covered by an AstroTurf rug that was as unconvincing a denial of the hardness of time as a cheap toupee. I wondered at the mourners' faces—the melting grief, the hard stoicism. Thirty minutes from the grave, I was back within the soft green walls of Sacred Heart Parish School. It was almost lunchtime. I resumed my impersonation of an American kid.

Were there certain writers that you looked to in forming your style? Sometimes I sense a bit of Auden coming through.

As a reader, I knew Auden the poet many years before I knew Auden the essayist. I don't know quite how to say this, but I find him gloriously un-modern because of his religious faith. There is a strength in his essays, some bedrock, that makes him seem, in the best sense, Victorian. He doesn't go all wobbly as a modern might.

My earliest influences in the art of the personal essay were more local. There was Joan Didion—the Didion of those glorious California essays of the sixties. Because she was from Sacramento and writing about the Central Valley when I first read her, it was she who taught me to imagine my own Sacramento as a literary landscape. About that same time, there was William Saroyan. There were voices in Saroyan, particularly the wondering boy in Fresno and the hungry writer's voice in San Francisco, I have never forgotten. For all of the passion and energy in Saroyan, however, there was something sexless about him—the son of a Presbyterian minister. Maybe that sexual diffidence deepened my sense of companionship with him. For reasons of my own, I did not, for many years, imagine sex in my writing.

I should mention two other influences crucial for my appreciation of the personal essay. First, James Baldwin, the great Jimmy Baldwin. I began with *Nobody Knows My Name* and I never let go of him—through the years of the Negro Civil Rights movement on our small black-and-white TV, then the many decades after. What impressed me about Baldwin was his literary elegance, despite all. He was never more resolutely in control than when he was describing Jim Crow America. The hideousness of anti-black racism could not undermine the clean line of his prose. And Orwell! I learned from George Orwell that narrative was compatible with the essay, that it was possible to write what I call the "biography of an idea"—and trace the way an idea makes its way through a life. Beginning with my first book and in all the books after, I employed the fictional devices of the short-story writer in writing my essays. My best essays, I think, are unafraid to be stories. That's Orwell's influence.



In another interview, you talk about experiencing what Auden, in his essay "The Protestant Mystics," called a Vision of Agape, when you were undergoing surgery for kidney cancer.

I mention in *Darling* that the night my mother died, the floor lamp at the foot of my bed turned itself on. When I told this to a neighbor, he supposed there must have been some sort of power surge in our part of the city.

Maybe because as a writer and journalist I live in a prosaic society, I long ago learned a certain discretion regarding mystery, one not enforced against poets like Auden. If Jesus ever appeared to me, as He appeared to Reynolds Price, I would not mention it here.

All I will tell you is that one summer dawn, in a dark pre-op room at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco, in the minutes before my gurney was wheeled into the operating room where I would be separated from

a two-inch blue-gray tumor, I experienced something—let me call it a sense of peace. This was all pre-anesthesia. Something happened to me—passive construction. From whence it came, I cannot say. I remember feeling something like a warm rush of water over my body. I did not levitate but I came close to the joyful lightness of being that the astronaut freed of gravity enjoys. This exhilaration lasted for no more than a minute. And it took place under a sentimental statue of the Virgin Mary, holding the Baby Jesus. When a Mexican male nurse who looked strangely like me—of the same age and toothy smile—pushed my gurney into the surgery, he softly told me, his face upside down over my head, that he had survived the same operation, and that I must not worry. I felt giddy. I smiled almost to laughter when I shook the lead surgeon's hand.

The desert appears often in *Darling*. I appreciated your take on it as a somehow fertile place. I had come to associate it with boredom and acedia, the noonday demon, about which the desert monastics used to complain.

I long regarded the desert ecology with a curiosity I gave to no other landscape. In a dentist's waiting room, as a boy, I stopped attending to the shrieking drill behind the pebbled glass window when I beheld photographs of the North African desert in *National Geographic*. My interest was as strange to me as sexual desire. I had no name for what attracted me.

I love the semantic paradox proposed by the noun we give to the desert—a place we define by what is no longer there. Once there were seas, once great tribes crossed these plains, great flocks of animals, once angels were as common as herons.

Place is always central to the writing of an essay for me, because we live in our bodies and whatever we know comes within the experience of our bodies. When I started thinking about the desert religions, I was struck by how rooted in place they are. I consider acedia to be the thorniest flower of the desert. Acedia is, on the one hand, the midday loneliness the monks find burdensome. But it also opens the soul to a longing for the solitary God who yearns for us. I do not mean to imply

a deterministic interpretation of religion, but I cannot write of the Abrahamic religions without writing of the desert.

And yes, I write of "postlapsarian" California, where I live. I write of the decline of my local newspaper. In writing about dying newspapers, I end up noticing the decline of the American cemetery, as more and more Americans are being cremated and their ashes are cast to the wind. And look at those boys and girls of modernity, along with their crazed parents and grandparents, walking up Fillmore Street, consulting their digital toys of "communication," oblivious to my staring. Much of the satire in *Darling* is directed against the modern secular resistance to place.

Las Vegas! Look at the way Las Vegas amuses the visitor by toying with the desert's tragic conclusion. Las Vegas has even become a model for the oil-rich capitals of the Middle East with their ice palaces and golf courses and skyscrapers that stand defiantly vertical against the desert's horizontal plane. Even Mecca has lately constructed a vast shopping center and a hotel in the shape of Big Ben, dwarfing the Kaaba.

The task of living within our bodies, even more than the fear of leaving the body in death, may be our greatest human predicament.

What does your average day, living in your body, look like?

My own writing life is as predictable as the old priest preparing to say the dawn mass. The pleasant cold, the mild pain of being alive. I have the same breakfast every day—cold cereal, yogurt, coffee. I read the newspapers. I take a fistful of vitamins. I shower. I linger at my bookshelf or at the window. I read a chapter or a poem from a shelf I keep above my desk of former lovers and seducers, impossible rivals—Nabokov or Lawrence, Larkin. Woolf. Sitting down at the computer is as daunting as the altar boy's first genuflection.

Aquinas described writing as a form of prayer. Writing is for me dishearteningly hermetic. Revision is writing. Revision is humiliation—Tuesday saying something less well than Monday.

Revision is open to noticing connections. Revision is joy at precisely that moment when the sentence no longer seems mine but speaks back to me and haughtily resists further revision.

I read in the afternoons. I take long walks. I watch TV in the evening. I write letters at all times.

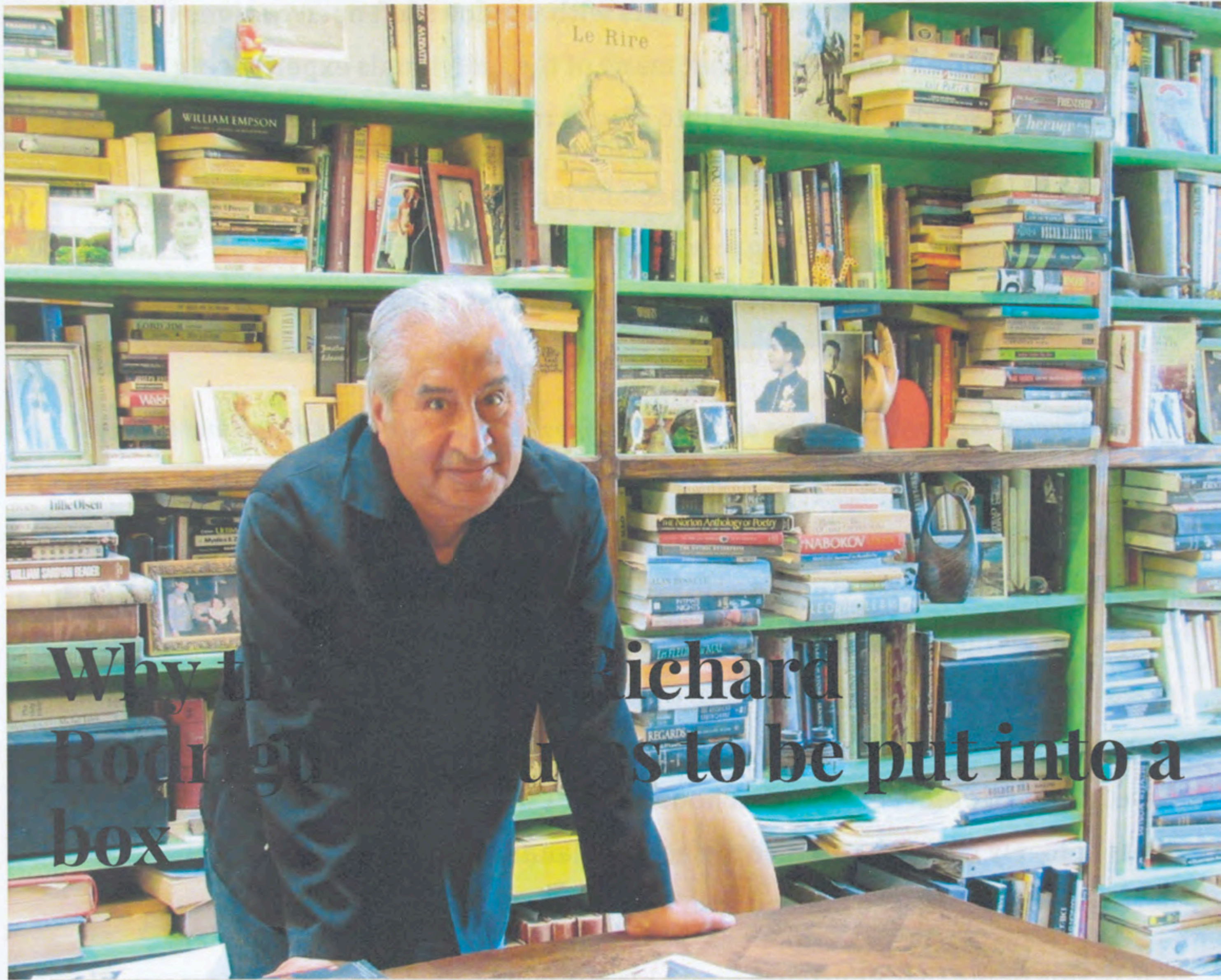
Do you have any advice for younger writers hoping for a career?

I don't have any advice. You are asking me to live in an era other than the one that formed me. But I will tell you this: An editor in New York told me the other day that, even as the reading audience for serious prose has diminished, the unsolicited manuscripts she receives are better than ever. Even while I think we are leaving the splendid Victorian age of serious popular literature—novels and poetry—we may be entering the Elizabethan Age, when few in London read, but there was an intensity of thought and beauty to the prose, and the poetry, and, of course, the plays.

Religion still reveres the book—just visit a yeshiva if you want to see devotion to the weight of the holy word. But in our secular lives the digital revolution seems to have eroded the great age of the middle-class reader. And without readers what are we? Half-writers whose sentences are never completed by the stranger's eyes.

I tell young writers not to give a single sentence away. Charge for every noun! Beyond the matter of strategy, the question really is whether our society needs complicated thought or expressions of beauty that reveal themselves only slowly and with difficulty. The question is whether a civilization can forget the pleasure of difficult, beautiful writing so thoroughly as to ignore its loss.

David Michael is a writer and producer living in Brooklyn.



Why t[illegible]ichard Rodrig[illegible]s to be put into a box

Olga Segura
January 25, 2019

The city of San Francisco sits atop the steep hills of northern California. Founded by Spanish colonizers in 1776 and named after St. Francis of Assisi, it is home to over 800,000 people. In August, the weather in the city famously changes from one moment to the next—chilly to warm, sunny to cloudy and back again. Throughout the city's streets, more surprising than the climate is the number of men and women experiencing homelessness. I was shocked by how many people were gathered in groups of 10 or more, block after block, something I had never encountered before.

As I drive through these streets, I see cars with windows left open or signs that read "no valuables here"; I later learn that many of the individuals experiencing homelessness survive by breaking into cars to rummage for items to sell for food.

This reality of deep poverty seems especially jarring against the backdrop of the city's architecture, a fascinating mix of modern and Victorian buildings. All along San Francisco's hills are beautiful and pristine homes, towering Queen Anne houses with large bay windows and exuberant colors.

In Hunger of Memory, Rodriguez outlines his opposition to affirmative action and bilingual education.

It is in one of these homes that I first meet the Mexican-American writer Richard Rodriguez. He lives in a stunning three-level gray-and-white apartment building in the Pacific Heights neighborhood of the city. He welcomes me into his home and gives me a tour of each apartment in the building, all of which are unlocked and empty except for the one he shares with his partner, Jim, on the second floor. "I have lived in this lovely Victorian house since 1982—just shy of 40 years," he says. "Lots of lovely ghosts here since my beloved landlord and several other tenants died here over the years. The house doesn't seem empty to me—or cold."

It is in this home that Rodriguez wrote his autobiography, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, published in 1982. It was his first book and tells the story of his journey from the first grade at Sacred Heart School in Sacramento to becoming one of the most recognizable Catholic Latino writers in the United States. Upon its publication, the book was extremely well received by critics and, in 1983, won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for nonfiction.

Rodriguez has also found critical acclaim with *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*. His essays have also been published in First Things, The New York Times, Mother Jones and Time magazine.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez outlines his opposition to affirmative action and bilingual education on the grounds that it prevents assimilation. “Bilingualists simplistically scorn the value of assimilation,” he writes. Assimilation, he insists, allowed him to “be able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in *gringo* society,” one who had “the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality.” This is a position readers have criticized; many have accused the author of betraying his own culture.

For me, as a Latina, Rodriguez felt like a contradiction in terms.

I read *Hunger* before meeting the author. For me, as a Latina, Rodriguez felt like a contradiction in terms. Despite being a brown, Catholic, gay man, who spoke only Spanish for the first six years of his life, he has spent much of his career arguing against programs created to help communities like ours. I wanted to put him into a box, but upon meeting him I quickly realized that part of his charm is his refusal to play to people’s expectations of who he should be.

***

Richard Rodriguez was born in San Francisco on July 31, 1944, to Victoria and Carlos Leopoldo Rodriguez, Mexican immigrants. They arrived in the United States from western Mexico in the 1930s; his mother from Jalisco, his father from Colima. His parents had very different relationships with Mexico, he tells me. “My mother loved everything about Mexico—the landscape of Jalisco, the family cow, the taste of Mexican ice cream, the sound of Mexican music, men singing,” he says.

His father, on the other hand, is what he describes as an “anti-Mexico Mexican.” Carlos Leopoldo was an orphan, raised by his uncle during the decades of anti-Catholic persecution in Mexico. In the late 19th century, President Benito Juarez passed legislation that repressed the Catholic Church in Mexico. In 1917, the government revised its constitution: The Catholic Church was banned from primary education, monastic orders were outlawed and clergy members were denied basic rights.

In 1926, President Plutarco Elías Calles enforced the "Calles Law," which placed further restrictions on the Catholic Church and religious orders. During Calles's presidency, from 1926 to 1929, there was the Cristero Rebellion. Over 40 priests were killed in Mexico between 1926 and 1934, including Blessed Miguel Pro, S.J.

He would not define his adolescence as a gay one but a Catholic one.

Rodriguez tells me that his father and uncle hid priests in family closets during this time. "One day, [my father] came upon a young priest he knew hanging from a noose, from a tree in the garden," he tells me, adding, "My father decided that day to leave Mexico. He was nearly 20 when he boarded a ship and ended up in San Francisco."

His family left San Francisco when he was 6. They moved to Sacramento, almost two hours north of San Francisco, after doctors suggested the warm and dry climate would help alleviate the symptoms of his brother's asthma. Sacramento, he says, is the city that he truly considers home. Growing up there, he was an altar server and loved attending Mass. "I can't even begin to describe how wonderful my life was and how mysterious it was," he says. "I would be called out of class to go to a funeral in the middle of the morning." During one such service, he had to help carry the casket because there was no one present. "It was the first time I'd carried death and I didn't know how heavy death would be."

He tells me that despite knowing he was gay at a very young age, he would not define his adolescence as a gay one but a Catholic one.

Catholicism has played a significant role in Rodriguez's life and work. In *Hunger*, he dedicates a chapter, "Credo," to his family's faith, where he describes the way his parents' faith shifted when they left behind their Mexican church for an Irish-American one in the United States. "I cannot overstate the influence of the Irish on my life and the lives of my family," he tells me. "All the nuns who taught me English

and then introduced me to the idea that I was an American, albeit a Catholic, were Irish—and the priests, too. Ireland played a very large part in my Americanization and my Catholic formation."

"One must join the company of generations of tongues in order to voice oneself apart, in whatever tongue."

Along with the influence of the church during his adolescence, he describes himself as a young boy who explored the world around him alone. He would go to boxing matches and lectures, including one where he heard Malcolm X speak. It was during these moments, Rodriguez tells me, that he began to form his voice as a writer. "That's how I came to be, the loneliness, the embarrassment of being an immigrant child, the intensity of it," he says.

Rodriguez began writing for his high school newspaper. He later attended Stanford University, Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley. On the first of our two afternoons together, he tells me that he has navigated two identities, two Richards: the Richard at home who spoke only Spanish, and the Richard in the public world, the one encouraged by nuns to speak only English to better his education.

This dual reality he grew up with, different languages for different contexts, informs many of his positions, including his thoughts on bilingual teaching in the American education system. "I don't think American education has taken seriously how difficult it is for working-class kids to achieve a public voice," he says. "Teachers don't do a good enough job impressing on students that their job as students is not to express themselves—their job is to make themselves understood by strangers."

Why can't language do both? I ask. Why can't language allow us to learn how to express our thoughts and feelings while also preparing us to talk to others who are not like us? Rodriguez tells me, "This desire you express for students, particularly

students of color, to express themselves as strangers, because that is how they are seen, is a great, and I mean that word exactly, romantic dream.

Hunger was rejected eight times before it was published by Bantam Books.

"The problem is that the language—any language the young would use—already was crafted by centuries before them, by the dead of their own race or nation, villains and saints both. One must join the company of generations of tongues in order to voice oneself apart, in whatever tongue. Speaking thus becomes an act of socialization, even if it is the declaration of separation."

***

Hunger was rejected eight times before it was published by Bantam Books. Upon its publication, it was hailed as a success by critics. But for his family it was a source of humiliation.

Rodriguez admits that when the book was first published, he never thought his family would read it. The family's humiliation was two-fold. "One, that I presented it at all, that I was talking about my relationship with my parents in public," he says. "Two it was the boy, the immigrant, working-class boy talking about his embarrassment at their foreignness."

His family hated the book, Rodriguez says, because it presented their lives for all the world to see—especially the white world. In "Mr. Secrets," the book's last chapter, Rodriguez recalls a letter his mother wrote to him prior to *Hunger*'s release: "Write about something else in the future. Our family life is private," she said. "Why do you need to tell the *gringos* about how divided you feel from the family?"

For most of Rodriguez's career he has challenged the ways in which communities of color use language in America.

He had to tell *Hunger*, he says, because he was finishing a story. "What I realized in grammar school was that I was becoming a public person. I was getting a public voice, a voice that my father didn't have. I was getting the voice of Richard

Rodriguez. *Ladies and gentlemen, Richard Rodriguez.*

"I was getting that voice," he goes on, "and everything that I did in school with writing and reading was giving me this voice. It was becoming an American voice, all these books that I was reading, from Faulkner to F. Scott Fitzgerald to Joan Didion. They were teaching me how an American sounds and what an American says—the impersonations that we have with our voice."

Last year, Rodriguez spoke to students at Duke University about the various ways Latinos identify themselves. While he spoke, he refused to use just one term to describe the Latino community, choosing instead to use several like Latina, Hispanic, Latinx. For most of Rodriguez's career—and his life—since *Hunger*, he has been dedicated to challenging the ways in which communities of color use language in America. These challenges often fall squarely into what is sometimes called respectability politics. ("Respectability politics" refers to the expectations of members of marginalized communities that their fellow community members conform to mainstream societal norms.)

No easy answers to these questions of language and identity arose during our time together, yet the more we spoke, the more I realized how pivotal Rodriguez's voice is for Latino readers attempting to understand our role as American citizens in the 21st century. His next projects include an essay about the relationship Americans have to monuments like tombstones and civil war statues. Later this year, he will give a speech on Catholicism in Chicago.

Richard Rodriguez cannot be placed into a box, as hard as readers, including myself, may try.

"My admiration for African-Americans is that they found their voice in mimicking the slave owner's voice," he says during our last conversation, referring to African-American Vernacular English. According to Rodriguez, it is by embracing linguistic

assimilation, by accepting English as the dominant language in America, that Latinos can truly achieve any kind of radical change. "Real revolution in language is taking the stranger's tongue and using it better than he."

This article also appeared in print, under the headline "Richard Rodriguez Will Not Fit Into Your Categories," in the February 4, 2019, issue.

More: LITERATURE / LATINO