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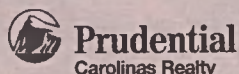


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## Out in Print

by Alistair McCartney

### 'Butterfly Boy' comes out of his cocoon

Rigoberto Gonzalez' sublime new memoir "Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa" tells a story that hasn't been told nearly enough in American Literature — queer, Chicano or mainstream: what it's like to grow up first-generation Mexican-American, gay and working class in the U.S. And, it has never been told with quite so much grace or humanity.

In prose that is lyrical, crisp and compressed, Gonzalez writes of the events big and small that have shaped him. Born in Bakersfield, Calif., to a family of Mexican farm workers, he moves back to Zacapu, Mexico, to spend his early childhood. Upon returning to California, he quickly recognizes his queerness and the necessity of keeping it hidden.

All of this is recalled as the then 19-year-old Gonzalez, trying to get away from a violent older lover and grappling with the messy complexity of family, takes a slow bus journey with his father back to his grandparents in Michoacan, a journey that in many ways sees the birth of Gonzalez as both self and storyteller.

And woven throughout is the presence of the butterfly — an image of eros, of queerness, of beauty and of violence.

The book is not only part of a classic tradition of American memoir, but extends this tradition through its uncanny combination of fearlessness and restraint. As acclaimed gay, Latino writer Jaime Manrique said of the book, it's "a deeply felt work that belongs in the company of classic American memoirs such as 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,' 'When I Was Puerto Rican' and 'Hunger for Memory.' Where it differs most memorably from those books is in its uncompromising depiction of a young person's sexual orientation."

In the U.S., where mainstream culture often feels uneasy with multiple identities, Gonzalez appears on the scene like someone spinning plates, investing categories of identity with a dizzying yet precise sense of beauty. The end result is exhilarating.

I caught up with Gonzalez at the University of Illinois, where he is Associate Professor of English and Latino Studies, to ask him some questions.

**Q: The thing I most loved about the book was its unflinching honesty. I'm thinking particularly of your writing about eros and sex, the sheer power of it. I haven't read a book in a long time that gets so beautifully at the mystery of queer desire, and the connection between sex and violence and sex and sorrow. How difficult was it to access that space, especially to revisit the violent relationship you describe?**

RG: "Butterfly Boy" took eight years to write.

The project began as a series of short nostalgic essays, mostly "Rated G" memories about Mexico, my family's migration to the U.S., my mother, etc.

But, when I began to weave them together, I had to develop a narrator who could turn the lens toward himself and be forthcoming about his own physicality and his desires. Otherwise he wouldn't be human or be a reliable guide through his difficult journey. And since the narrator is still a teenager, I wanted to preserve that sense of awe, mystery and heart-

break that we all go through in adolescent experimentation.

I simply described physical contact and wrote the sex scenes through the curious and hungry mind of a teen without getting too crass or without romanticizing gay sex. To tap into such a place I simply closed my eyes and remembered. I'm now 36 and that narrator is 19, so the benefit of distance allowed me to return to the



most painful of memories, which still hurt, but which I can now articulate through the wisdom of growth and maturity.

**Q: The other most striking aspect of the book is your insight into the complexity of father-son relations and the messy space of family in general. How did you manage the challenge of writing about family and people close to you? Were there taboos that had to be broken?**

RG: I know many writers who live afraid of relatives recognizing themselves in their fiction. In nonfiction there's no hiding place. So when I set out to write truth as I remembered it, I didn't bother censoring myself or changing details in order to protect the innocent, otherwise I'd be compromising the integrity of the memoir. But being honest doesn't mean being disrespectful. Like Annie Dillard warns, "Writing is an art. Not a martial art."

So I wanted to handle the subject of my father and of my abusive lover delicately, a balance between rage and affection. I did however keep my lover nameless, as well as most of the relatives I write about, even though I'm sure they can all recognize themselves in the book. What's important is the experience, not the specific identity of the players.

**Q: The book is certainly a coming of age story of a young gay man but, not to give too much away, it might not exactly be called a "coming out" story? Talk about the specificity of coming out in Latino communities and how it potentially differs from an Anglo experience.**

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