

House Built on Ashes: A Memoir

José Antonio Rodríguez

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Jose Antonio Rodriguez's *House Built on Ashes* is labeled a memoir, but could just as easily be considered a collection of creative nonfiction shorts. Rodriguez writes beautifully, and his prose conveys the transition from his early childhood in rural Mexico to his life on the "other side" once he moves across the Texas border. The short-story structure works well, reflecting the way individual anecdotes combine to form memory.

Rodriguez opens the book in 2009, when he was a doctoral student learning that his former hometown had been taken over by the drug trade, then flashes back to his citizenship interview in 1992. Once that context is established, he divides his life into chapters that each cover many stories in defined sets of years, in chronological order, and the writing voice cleverly changes a bit in each chapter as the narrator ages and learns more about himself and his surroundings.

The early-childhood chapters are the most compelling. Rodriguez recaptures the perspective of a young child, when what will soon be ordinary experiences are still new. Some of the book's most beautifully descriptive passages involve his first visit to the home of his aunt, which introduces him to modern conveniences like an indoor toilet ("I figure maybe I've broken this special chair because the pool of water is gone") and a refrigerator ("like a giant new toy that's never been in a fire").

As the book goes along, its narrator faces some significant challenges. He gradually comes to understand his homosexuality, first hinted at in early incidents of classmates calling him homophobic names and a troubling encounter involving his cousin. He struggles with being one of the poorer children at school and tells a heartbreaking story about a teacher calling him into a meeting to discuss his body odor, the result of limited access to the family's outdoor shower. At the same time, he is selected for a program for gifted children, at a different school.

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JEFF FLEISCHER (March/April 2017)

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