



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ ANTONIO RODRÍGUEZ

Q *What type of themes do you explore in *House Built on Ashes*?*

A The memoir explores themes centered on the journey to self-discovery, family, the closeted experience, the American Dream, immigration, but the theme that I think encompasses all of these is the concept of home and how we come to create it. The main question that informs this narrative, at least the one that informed my writing of it, is “How does one create home in the face of destabilizing formative elements?” The narrator’s experiences constantly undermine his sense of stability, even within himself when he discovers, to his then horror, that he might be queer. And yet he yearns for a place of real and complete belonging. This yearning is I believe what drives him, whether he can articulate it or not, though I’m curious to see what the reader takes away from this work.

Q *What did you discover about yourself in relation to growing up in two different cultures?*

A I discovered that there’s no easy fit in either culture, each with its own plusses and minuses, nor in the middle, and I discovered that this can be a positive. I learned that this unconventional subjectivity, when probed and investigated, can lead to valuable insights into how community is created, how the self is created in relation to community, and how the outsider copes with this marginalization. By the way, I also discovered that being bilingual is a pretty great tool.

Q *How did this experience influence your approach to writing poetry and memoir?*

A The fact that the two cultures I inhabit are not considered equals in the eyes of the West by many measures—including economic, political and cultural—and the fact that the one I was born into is considered the lesser one, the third-world one, very much informs how I came to writing and to my intellectual pursuits. With poetry, one of the main themes in the past has been the articulation of the unspoken (the shame of being Other) and a focus on the dispossessed, materially and otherwise. With memoir, there’s more room to investigate the institutional/cultural roots of this shame and other formative elements of the self. Still, there must always be room to explore the value of beauty—the moments where the embattled self finds rest—even in its seemingly insignificant forms.

Q *Why is it important to explore the connection between memory and place?*

A I think they are intimately connected; both are constitutive of who we are as human beings. I think wherever we go we carry all that we’ve been with us, including the places that we’ve lived and that have lived us. Nothing is ever fully left behind. I think in our hyper-textual society, deep memory can be neglected in favor of the eager-for-attention now. I believe neglecting memory risks misunderstanding the present—personal and communal—so I hope this book is a work of resistance against forgetting