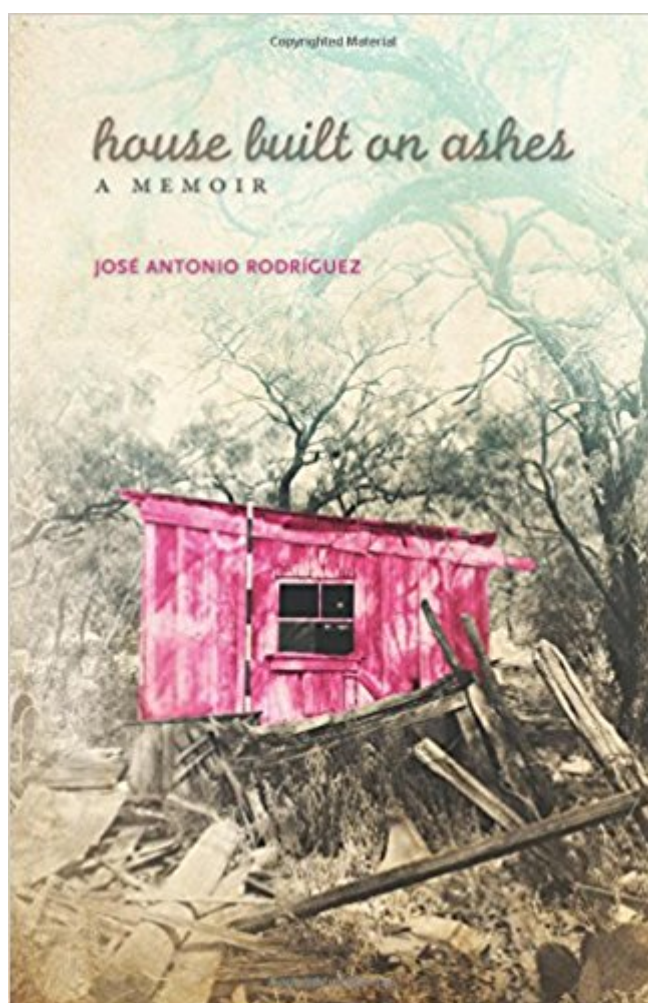


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# House Built On Ashes: A Memoir (Chicana And Chicano Visions Of The Americas Series)



## Synopsis

The year is 2009, and Jos  Antonio Rodr guez, a doctoral student at Binghamton University in upstate New York, is packing his suitcase, getting ready to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with his parents in South Texas. He soon learns from his father that a drug cartel has overtaken the Mexican border village where he was born. Now, because of the violence there, he won't be able to visit his early-childhood home. Instead, his memories will have to take him back. Thus, Rodr guez begins a meditative journey into the past. Through a series of vignettes, he mines the details of a childhood and adolescence fraught with deprivation but offset by moments of tenderness and beauty. Suddenly he is four years old again, and his mother is feeding him raw sugarcane for the first time. With the sweetness still on his tongue, he runs to a field, where he falls asleep under a glowing pink sky. The conditions of rural poverty prove too much for his family to bear, and Rodr guez moves with his mother and three of his nine siblings across the border to McAllen, Texas. Now a resident of the "other side," Rodr guez experiences the luxury of indoor toilets and gazes at television commercials promising more food than he has ever seen. But there is no easy passage into this brighter future. Poignant and lyrical, *House Built on Ashes* contemplates the promises, limitations, and contradictions of the American Dream. Even as it tells a deeply personal story, it evokes larger political, cultural, and social realities. It speaks to what America is and what it is not. It speaks to a world of hunger, prejudice, and far too many boundaries. But it speaks, as well, to the redemptive power of beauty and its life-sustaining gift of hope.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Jos  Antonio Rodr - guez has written a classic. Gently poetic, utterly authentic, packed with rich scenes, *House Built on Ashes* invites us into the author’s worlds of growing up in a big family in the borderlands of Mexico and South Texas. Read this brilliant book by a true maestro who holds his many worlds with reverence and curiosity; you will never be the same.” —Naomi Shihab Nye, author of *Transfer and You and Yours*

In *House Built on Ashes*, Jos  Antonio Rodr - guez has gifted us a luminous coming-of-age memoir, a tender, searching exploration of what it means to be a resident alien in more ways than one. Rodr - guez is an intimate guide to the hoops of allegiance that a boy-becoming-man must leap.” —Rob Nixon, author of *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* and *Dreambirds: The Strange History of the Ostrich in Fashion, Food, and Fortune*

A beautiful portrayal of a world seldom seen in American letters, *House Built on Ashes* is needed, especially now.” —Sandra Cisneros, author of *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* and *The House on Mango Street*

*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. . .told in a way that makes the seemingly simple feel truly meaningful.” —Foreword Reviews

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Jos  Antonio Rodr - guez, Assistant Professor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley, is the author of *The Shallow End of Sleep* and *Backlit Hour*.

**MEMOIR** Jos  Antonio Rodr - guez *House Built on Ashes: A Memoir* University of Oklahoma Press Paperback, 978-0-8061-5501-2, (also available as an e-book), 208 pgs., \$19.95 February 16, 2017

“The lessons you’ve been taught about that golden land of promise called the United States sparkle before you like a glass of crystal cold water, and you marvel at your good

fortune. Becoming something mighty and tall with all that no one must ever doubt is right, becoming something you don't know yet you hope will render you almost unrecognizable to who you are now, becoming one of them, becoming American.

José Antonio Rodríguez grew up in McAllen, Texas, the youngest of ten children born to a homemaker and a citrus-farm field hand. On weekends, they crossed the river to visit family in the tiny Mexican village where Rodríguez was born. During the summers he worked Panhandle onion fields, as his mother told him to do well in school so he won't have to pick onions when he is her age. Rodríguez excels and is placed in the Gifted and Talented Program in school. Eventually, he applies for naturalization because the scholarship he needs is only available to U.S. citizens. He's conflicted when he swears the oath of loyalty, forsaking Mexico forever: "Up until this moment, that village over there across the river with its border guards and police dogs seemed like nothing but outhouses, sweat, and dirt," Rodríguez writes. "Nothing to miss. Nothing at all."

*House Built on Ashes: A Memoir* by José Antonio Rodríguez is the twentieth volume in the University of Oklahoma Press's *Chicana & Chicano Visions of the Americas* series, the editorial board of which boasts Rudolfo Anaya, Denise Chabé, and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, among others. *House Built on Ashes* is Rodríguez's account of a creative, sensitive, intelligent child growing up not quite here and not quite there; realizing he's gay as he begins to question the logic of antiquated customs, chafing against a macho culture; learning that there's no such thing as a small humiliation, and that dignity is essential but costly.

*House Built on Ashes* is structurally atypical. Loosely chronological, the story is told in lyrical yet spare prose, creating evocative sketches, like linked short stories. Rodríguez has a fine eye for small details that tell a large story and envelop you in a place and time. When his father leaves to find work in Texas, "One day the evening came, but he didn't. One morning the rooster called but didn't wake him."

On childhood tradeoffs: "Now we must wear shoes all the time. And the fence keeps people from stopping by to talk to Amá, the way they did on the other side."

On the jarring dislocation of moving to the United States, where his aunt's house includes a garage: "Why would cars need a room?"

Rodríguez is a master of the simile. At the border inspection, they "stare at our hands like we didn't always have them"; his cousin's bed is "tall and full like cakes from a bakery," "her curls tight like her giggles."

Packing for a Thanksgiving trip from Rodríguez's upstate New York university to Texas to visit family serves as catalyst to excavate the past. "I think then of who we are before we are taught customs, flags, pledges of allegiance, names of nation-states, their margins on a map, and the

armed men who guard them," Rodríguez writes. "I think of what we lose when we win." Originally published by Lone Star Literary Life.

It is easy for me to see why *House Built on Ashes* is a finalist in the 2017 International Latino Book Awards in the category of Best Latino Focused Nonfiction Book (to be announced in September). Along with the quality of his writing, the story-telling style used, and his amazing memory, I was perhaps most impressed by Mr. Rodriguez' courage, not only as he expressed his periodic pain to us, the readers, but as he recalled it himself. As one who has also moved to "the other side", but in my case from the US to Guatemala, there was a great deal that was familiar. I thank you, sir, for all of it. (And I'm hoping for the next chapters, the And then what?)

This book is an absolute must read. I adore it and will use it for all my Freshman Writing Courses. Made me weep from top to bottom, from the first to the last page. -Sarah

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