



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Richard Rodriguez: Part II

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Richard Rodriguez: Part II

BILL MOYERS: *[voice-over]* Richard Rodriguez was born in San Francisco in 1944, the son of working-class immigrant parents from Mexico. He spoke only a few words of English when he started school, but went on to become a highly prized "minority" student.

With degrees from Stanford and Columbia universities, he studied in London as a Fulbright scholar, but while pursuing his doctorate at Berkeley, he suddenly walked away from a promising career in academia. Despite his ambition to teach, Richard Rodriguez rebelled against job offers which, he says, were coming his way just because of his Hispanic surname.

He became a freelance writer, and in 1982 published *Hunger for Memory*, an autobiography about how education had altered his life. Some critics condemned him for having forsaken his roots, but he was praised by others for his intimate understanding of what can happen when someone moves from a minority culture into the mainstream. He is now at work on a book about Mexico's influence on the American memory. It's called *Mexico's Children*. We talked in New York City.

[Interviewing] Why that title? It's not about Mexico.

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ: The book that I've been working on for the last several years is a book about California, and to live in California, as indeed to live in the Southwest, is to live in a land that was first Mexico, and then America, which is to say that it's a land populated by—at least by holy ghosts. I mean, there are all kinds of holy names all over the landscape of California. I live in a city named for St. Francis. And that somehow America, which has always imagined itself coming upon an empty land, or at least a virgin land, has to confront in the Southwest, I think, the possibility that, in fact, there were other people here, and not only Indians, but people who left Christian crosses on the sides of hills in defiance of the newcoming Anglo in the 1850s.

So a lot of what I'm doing as this kind of betrayer of Mexico, that I, who have come here to the United States and who have, in some way, put Mexico away, in some way I've always thought of myself as the last gringo in America, the last one to speak Spanish again, the last one to accommodate Mexico into my life. In some way I've always been haunted by the fact that this was Mexico, that the land under my feet belonged to that place that I thought my parents had escaped.

MOYERS: Do you live in that world? Do you keep one foot in that old world of Mexico?

RODRIGUEZ: Insofar as Mexico, for me, has always been the struggle—the Mexican-American identity has been the struggle between desire and memory, the culture of memory being Mexico, the culture of the past, the insistence that you are related to ancestors, the insistence that you belong to a community, the Catholic insistence, as opposed to the American assurance that you can stand on your own,

that you are new, that you, Richard Rodriguez, are your own man, that America gives you the freedom to become anything you want.

MOYERS: Some of you.

RODRIGUEZ: Some of you.

MOYERS: And there is a cruelty in that shimmering image, that promise, isn't there? Because not—so many will not make it. So many will be broken. But while being broken, they will be purged of the very things that you said they bring with them, the holy names, the roots, the sense of place and community, the loyalty to one's own tribe. That will be purged from them even when they don't make it in this country.

RODRIGUEZ: It's hard to know how we—how you and I would describe making it in America. I mean, I went back to a village in Mexico where every year Mexicans who have gone north to the United States—to Austin, Texas, to Hollister, California—every year they go back to their home village, and they go back in their Winnebagos and they go back in their Toyota sedans and so forth. And it's this odd—it's this odd celebration of Mexico, the memory, and America, the achievement. Factory workers will go back, and what they take with them in their suitcases are dresses and suits they never wear in America. What they will wear in this village is this glorious kind of Cinderella wardrobe, the celebration of having broken the cycle of repetition, of despair, the cycle of the seasons. Something's new in America, and I know a lot of people—you know, I know a lot of people who speak about the despair of America don't quite get to the point at which, despite despair, America moves to some other energy. That if I will not make it, my son will, or my daughter will; if they won't make it, our grandchildren will. That somehow we're going to break through, we're going to break through the cycle and we are going to recreate history. America moves that way.

I mean, people get out of bed in this country with that assurance. And I think that just because we don't all end up in boardrooms, I think that it's a mistake to think that America tastes like a failure to people.

MOYERS: But the America that I think of is the America that says, "Put your roots behind you, don't hold on to them." Can one be Mexican and American? I mean, mustn't you be one or the other? Isn't the hyphen a kind of illusion?

RODRIGUEZ: Oh, I think it's an illusion. I don't know how it is—what it means to be bicultural, frankly. I mean, the tensions within my own soul between Mexico and the United States, between what I call comedy and tragedy, between the tragic assurance—the tragic demands of Mexico and the comic assurances of America are such—

MOYERS: Wait just a minute. The tragic demands of Mexico and the comic assurances of America? What do you mean? What's tragic about Mexico?

RODRIGUEZ: Mexico's a tragic country, I think, for lots of reasons, partic—if—there is a sadness in Mexico that I think is deeper than its history, although its history is certainly tragic. The country invaded—the country invaded again and again and again, raped, its leaders betraying the people. The sense of one generation of poverty following on another, and so forth. The final—the deepest tragedy of

Mexico, I think, is Indian and Spanish both, and that this strange mixture of pessimism in the culture, the death culture of the Spanish and the extraordinary sadness of Spain that got in—I mean, go to a Mexican church one day if you want to see—

MOYERS: Oh, yeah.

RODRIGUEZ:—sorrow on the walls. And the enchantment that that brought to Mexicans—I mean, I think the Indian sensibility recognized that immediately as kin to its soul. I know, I took my parents to Europe a few years ago, and this was supposed to be our grand tour. In some way I was—I as the American was showing my father, a man with whom I'd had this long argument over the years about tragedy and comedy, about whether suffering is necessary in America, whether it is going to capture me as he said it would. He said, "Finally this country will destroy you."

MOYERS: Your father said this to you?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, as we were polishing the blue DeSoto, and I a teenager. He said, "Life is not easy." He said, "You know, you think you're just going to—all will happen to you." And I kept on telling him that nothing that he knew in Mexico was going to happen to me. But Mexico had betrayed everything about him. He had gone to two years of education and his parents died. First his mother dies, and he remembers going to the cemetery and the casket being lowered into the grave, and he as a boy always interested in death, peering down into the grave and seeing the hands of someone previously buried reaching up for the casket. Two days later his brother, the infant that caused my grandmother to die—she, the baby dies. Jesus is his name, Jesus, Jesus dies on a thunders night. Then his father dies a year later. My father, this orphan boy, surrounded by death as a child, wondering what it means, this kind of partner to death.

MOYERS: But what about the comic assurances you say America is *crossstalk?*

RODRIGUEZ: I remember as a boy—I mean, I've always flirted with—I've remained a Roman Catholic and a Mexican Catholic at that, I think, but I've always flirted with Protestantism. In fact, I was, for a number of years, at Union Theological Seminary.

MOYERS: I didn't know that.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I've always been interested in Protestantism. I remember as a young boy going by Protestant churches. I was interested all the time that they wore suits. I always thought that was interesting, that everybody went dressed. And they looked richer than Catholics. Catholics went and came, you went whatever way you were in and so forth.

I went to an Irish Catholic church, too, which was even a bit—it wasn't yet Americanized, as we have become. And I remember bicycling by the Freemont Presbyterian Church in Sacramento and hearing the Protestants sing. And I'd never heard singing like that. It was nothing like the sad Mexican songs, I'll tell you. I mean, these were people who knew where they were in the world. These were people who were standing upright. These were people who were facing God one-to-one. These were people who believed in Easter.

That was not—I will tell you, that is not the reason we prayed to the sorrowful Virgin in my house. I mean, we prayed in sorrow. We

prayed out of the assurance that, in fact, man is helpless. We prayed in the knowledge that, in fact, on our own, we would drown. And suddenly these voices come pouring out of this California church, and I was entranced.

MOYERS: But what's comic about that assurance that you get from either the Protestant and American marriage?

RODRIGUEZ: You can be born again in this country. You can become a new man. You can even change your name. You can dye your hair. You can be—you can go to Muscle Beach and get a new body. You can become a billboard on Sunset Boulevard 40 feet tall with a beauty mark five feet tall or five feet wide.

MOYERS: That is—that is comic.

RODRIGUEZ: That's extraordinary. That's extraordinary. And even the secular version of America, which now—we now live in, it's an enormously funny place. I mean, you know that people—I get letters all the time from immigrants who will read something that I've said—I'm always writing in celebration of this extraordinary American reality—and I got a letter from this Vietnamese man who owns a restaurant in Arlington, Virginia. And he said, "Yes, I understand what you mean and so forth, yes, that's all very fine," but he says, "I have this daughter now who's about 15 years old. And she's coming home now gum-chewing and she comes home with American slang in her mouth—on her lips and I don't like it."

Well, I mean, that's what you—that's what you get in America. America is 15 years old and America rides a skateboard and that guy who just went by us was Tom Paine. I mean that America has that quality to it. It is a profoundly immature country.

The pity of America, I think, is always that we don't understand just how enormously seductive we are to the world. We always imagine ourselves as virgin, as somehow easily—easily upset by the foreigner. That has been the American xenophobia, that we are somehow this kind of pristine place and these people are going to change us. Well, in fact, America has been doing a lot of changing in the world these days. And it is a culture, it is an idea, it is an advertisement. It's a lipstick, it's a Coke bottle, it has its effect.

People always say, "Well, why did you choose to become American?" they said. Well, I remember James Farley, the essayist, the British essayist who died recently, has this essay about his coming to America from Britain. And he remembers—I think it was in Maryland, on this suburban street in Maryland, walking—this was just a few months after he'd come to this country—walking down the street. And there was this little kid of about four. And the kid looks up to him and says, "Hi." And Farley falls in love with this culture in which a child of four can say that remarkable American word, "hi," to an adult.

MOYERS: Hi.

RODRIGUEZ: And the little boy toddles away. When I was a boy in Sacramento, I remember a man saying "hi" to me, and that word came to me with such force, such informality, against all the formal structure of Mexico, the *tu* and *usted*, the distinction between public and private, between formal and informal society. There was this Jeffersonian "hi" that just came pouring at me. There was no way to

resist it.

MOYERS: You said you chose to be an America. did you really choose? Was that an option?

RODRIGUEZ: No. No. That's why I'm saying—I didn't choose.

MOYERS: Yeah.

RODRIGUEZ: It doesn't come to you as a choice. It comes to you—American comes to you—

MOYERS: You are thrown up in America, and out of—

RODRIGUEZ:—absolutely. You learn it—you know, you learn it just walking through the crowds, the impatience. When you go to a McDonald's, what you learn about America, you don't have to read the—you know, the *Federalist Papers*. You don't have to read the documents of America to know it. You learn it in the impatience of the crowd. They want their burger now. They want it fast. They'll settle for tepid if it can be fast.

That energy, that ambition, that drive, that slouching American walk at intersections, the pace of traffic, the assertion of neon. These are not things you need to learn about in school. I mean, you get the point of this country very early.

MOYERS: Do you feel lonely as an American? And I ask that question because—because Ernest Cortez, whom you know, said to me not long ago, "Americans are so atomized and so alienated. It is the "I"—it is not we the people, it is "I" versus the people, that I must assert myself," he said.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

MOYERS: That's what's going to bring America down, that the—

RODRIGUEZ: Well, that also is what created America.

MOYERS:—that's it, that's the paradox.

RODRIGUEZ: It's the brilliance of America. I think it's—I have a friend, this old Mexican priest, who said to me that America is a country without a father, so of course everyone is mad up there, he says. But—we're mad, but of course, we are what the rest of the world wants. I mean, who wouldn't want to be in this strange place at Twelfth Night, where you can be—you can dress up in adult clothes, you know, and still be 15. That essentially the regret we have as Americans, of course, is that grandmothers got left behind at the window and that we forget, and that we leave Kansas for Sacramento, California and that, except on Mother's Day, you see less and less of that other reality. That the small town becomes a suburb, becomes part of a metropolitan community. That loss, of course, is enormous in this country and it's part of the deep unhappiness in the American character right now.

MOYERS: You sense it among—

RODRIGUEZ: Oh, I don't sense it only—I don't sense it primarily among the immigrant communities, where there is still the residue of the "we." I sense it primarily among white middle-class Americans who look at my family with awe, I mean, that they don't understand how we can—how we exist, essentially. I think that there's a great sorrow in this country. I think it is decadent, on the other hand, for Americans not to realize the enormous privilege of that "I," and the fragile gift of it. I mean, what America gives the world is that "I," the

possibility.

MOYERS: I the individual, but I—

RODRIGUEZ: I the individual. We mustn't forget the freedom and the extraordinary joy that comes with that.

MOYERS: You're the ultimate "I."

RODRIGUEZ: That's right, the ultimate "I," which is what the—what in some way why I was always entranced by writing, the chance to speak back, the chance to assert something, the chance to write my idea in my words on my terms, without anybody bringing an eraser to bear, without anyone saying that you can't say that. *Hunger of Memory*, that first book, was written against my parents' wishes, against their insistence, my mother's insistence, particularly, that we shouldn't speak this way about the family, we shouldn't speak this way publicly. "What?" What business do I have to tell Bill Moyers what goes on in the family?

MOYERS: Or millions of people who read this book, who read about your private emotions toward your mother, toward your father.

RODRIGUEZ: Indeed. And those are real questions on her part. I mean, this is—that book is a violation of the culture of "we" in some sense.

MOYERS: In one sense, you can't be an American until you're willing to let it hang out, to use the old cliché.

RODRIGUEZ: That's right. That's right.

MOYERS: To take your private life and make it a public act.

RODRIGUEZ: Which is to say this violation of—this sin against one's parents. This was not a literary affectation on my part, this was a real drama, and it happened—it was a real crisis in my family that I wrote that book, that I write about private things publicly, that I straddled that border between those two cultures.

The problem for me, I remember, I was at Harvard about a year ago, the Kennedy School, and this Mexican-American woman raised her hand, there was a quite angry group of Mexican-Americans, Hispanics. She raised her hand and she said, "Mr. Rodriguez," she said, "you know, I want to," she said, "I've been waiting for six years to ask this question to you." And it wasn't a question so much as a statement. The statement was basically, "You're screwed up," she said. "And I want these people to know that," she said. "This is not the voice of Hispanic America. This is not the Mexican-American experience that you're writing. You're screwed up, and you're parading your problems in front of these people, and they're thinking—they're going to think that this is the Mexican-American experience."

Well, what I want to tell her and you, I guess, generally is that of—I'm not Mexican-American. I don't know what that means. And this is, I think, my long war against the social sciences. I oppose very much the idea that there is a typical Mexican-American or Hispanic-American experience. I insist on a singularity of life experience.

What I insist also, however, as a writer is that if you render the "I" fully, if you write only about that man from a small Texas town, that boy of 12, not his brother, not his sister, that boy, Billy Moyers, that day in August when he was 12 years old, that afternoon—not all afternoons in Texas, but that afternoon when he was 12 years old and

when he first knew the knowledge of death, the more I indicate your story and separate you from everyone else around you, the more this magic happens in literature, what we call the universal. And that is, we begin somehow to share in that life. It's the most mysterious and paradoxical aspect of writing.

The more you write about Richard Rodriguez — not his brother, who was more graceful, who looked like Mario Lanza; not his sisters, who looked Polynesian and who floated in their own adolescent worlds — but Richard Rodriguez, the high-strung kid who read through long Sacramento summers, Richard Rodriguez when he was 12 years old in Sacramento, that afternoon, the more you specify him, the more you get these letters from people who will say, "You know, I'm five generations German-American, I know nothing of Mexican-Americans, but I am you."

MOYERS: I understand that, but I also think I maybe, here's my understanding of why that young woman would have accosted you at Harvard. She would have said, "If everyone of us goes in your direction, to succeed as an individual, to express ourselves personally, that happens to our group, which is being held down by the boot of slavery? If the blacks had done that, if it was every black for himself or herself in the '60s, there would have been no civil rights movement. It takes more than one to make a movement, to break out of the—

RODRIGUEZ: Well, if you're asking me whether there's an Hispanic political movement and whether there should be, that's one question. If you're comparing Hispanics to blacks, that's another assertion. I think Hispanics are not blacks in America. For one thing, there is no such thing as an Hispanic race.

MOYERS: You're not a race, you're a—

RODRIGUEZ: We're a group of races, we're an ethnic identity in America.

MOYERS: So what binds you? It's language, isn't it, I mean, the history of language?

RODRIGUEZ: Is it language? Is it language when Brazil doesn't speak Spanish, when most—when many Hispanics in this country no longer speak Spanish? There is this attempt to use language as the kind of unifying glue to the experience, but is it true?

MOYERS: What you're saying is, it's very hard to establish one's identity today.

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely. Well, I keep—you know, people always ask me, "Well, what do you think of yourself as?" And I say, "Well, I think of myself as an American." "Oh, no, no, what does that mean exactly?" "Well, I think of myself as Chinese," I say to them. Or I think of myself as Irish. I was educated by Irish immigrant nuns for my first eight years of school. And I was studying a few years ago in England, and—a country that I found perfectly agreeable and so forth. One weekend, as a kind of lark, I decided to go to Ireland, and I remember getting off the Aer Lingus plane in Dublin and finding myself immediately—I mean, immediately at home. And I thought to myself, "This is odd, that I should feel at home here in this culture."

And then it occurred to me, about two years later, that every person I know, every close friend, every close friend to this day, my

closest friends have always been Irish Catholics. That was not a choice.

MOYERS: That was true in Sacramento?

RODRIGUEZ: Coming from Sacramento to San Francisco, through an adulthood where I have all kinds of freedoms and associations and so forth, the people I understand best are Irish. And I say I'm Chinese in the sense that I live in the first mainline American city which is now Asian, San Francisco, and I am breathing it, I am tasting it. It is changing my life. I don't—ask me what it means and I cannot tell you, but I know I am becoming Chinese. I know that somehow my character is being changed. Do I want it? I don't even think that's the question. Is it happening? Yes.

MOYERS: There are some people whose pores are just open. They don't consciously push a lever and they open, they just open, and that may be you.

RODRIGUEZ: It's America. It's America. People say to me all the time, I mean, "You're so Anglicized," they say. Well, I'm not Anglicized at all, I'm Americanized. By which I mean that I speak American English, I don't speak British English. Listen to this language that you and I are speaking, I California accent with perhaps traces of Spanish, you Texas with perhaps traces of Spanish. But we're creating, somewhere between us, this American tongue. It is—it was something that was shoved down the throats of a lot of immigrant kids and it came up sounding very different. It does not sound British, it has its own energies. There is no one in America who does not speak black English. There is no one in America who does not speak Yiddish. There is no one in America who does not sigh with the sigh of Mexican grandmothers. It is—it is an assimilationist language, it is an immigrant language. In that sense it's a world language, which is one of the reasons why it's such a vital language.

MOYERS: What do you hear on the buses in New York today, on the subways, when you come to town?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I hear a lot of—I hear tension in the air. I hear voices raised against each other. At some other level I hear exactly the opposite, that is, I hear the re-creation of the American tongue. I hear—I remember sitting at Denny's Restaurant in southern California a few weeks ago, and there was this extraordinary conversation between the Mexican cook, short order cook, he and his boss, in front of his stove and she on the other side, she conveying to him in this extraordinary Spanglish the order of fried eggs and so forth and so on.

But also the strange new menu that Americans are now ordering, you know, *huevos fritos* or whatever, *huevos rancheros* or something. And I thought to myself, this is something, something is going on here. I was—on the subject of food, I should tell you that I was—do you know Velveeta cheese?

MOYERS: Well, I know of it. I know I shouldn't eat it, it's processed.

RODRIGUEZ: It's the blondest of American cheeses. Velveeta, apparently, I don't know whether they still have it, but a year ago they were advertising Velveeta Mexican-style. And I don't know what they put in it, maybe pimento or something, and olé, you know. There was this ad for Velveeta Mexican-style cheese on television the other day, and it was—you know, Papa was sitting there, Gringo Papa was sit-

ting there with his two kids and it was dinnertime, and Mama was nowhere in sight. Revolution number one, okay. So Papa goes to the refrigerator and pulls out these kind of pre-cast taco shells, you know, these concrete things that you buy in the grocery store, and shoves them full of Velveeta cheese, Mexican-style, and puts them in the oven.

And then Mother comes in with her bow tie, she having been at work, okay. And they all sit down to have, you know, their tacos with Velveeta. And I thought, I am seeing a revolution here. And it's passed under our nose, it's passing to our mouths. Revolution.

Twenty years ago, 25 years ago, when you rang the doorbell, Billy Moyers, and Billy Moyers was at the door, my mother used to run to the kitchen and put lids on everything so you wouldn't see what we were eating.

MOYERS: She was ashamed?

RODRIGUEZ: Ashamed.

MOYERS: Eating corn and strange food—

RODRIGUEZ: Tacos and frijoles and everything. I mean, what kind of Americans were we? So she was putting lids on everything so you wouldn't see us. And 25 years later, you're eating it.

MOYERS: [voice-over] From New York City, this has been a conversation with Richard Rodriguez. I'm Bill Moyers.

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1990 Season

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2/4/90 #202 **Robert Lucky**—Part II (Mr. Lucky discusses how computers and humans will learn to co-exist.)

2/11/90 #203 **Patricia Churchland** (Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego. Mrs. Churchland discusses her theories of how the mind works.)

2/18/90 #204 **Jonas Salk** (Mr. Salk is the developer of the polio vaccine and the founder of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. He talks about AIDS research and how the technique of "negotiating" with the AIDS virus offers a way of thinking about human beings as "part of, not apart from" nature.)

2/25/90 #205

Maxine Hong Kingston—Part I (Author of *The Warrior Woman*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*. Ms. Kingston offers new images of America as a "melting pot" where the dutiful notions of the Puritans blend with the Monkey Spirit of the Orient to produce a new American consciousness.)

3/4/90 #206

Maxine Hong Kingston—Part II

3/11/90 #207 **Toni Morrison**—Part I (Author of *Song of Solomon* and Pulitzer-Prize winning *Beloved*; and is also an editor and teacher.)

3/18/90 #208

Peter Sellars—Part I (Mr. Sellars discusses his controversial career as a theatre director; he has been director of the Boston Shakespeare Company and the American National Theatre Company at the Kennedy Center. Presently, at age thirty-two, he is director the Los Angeles Festival.)

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Peter Sellars—Part II (Mr. Sellars discusses his views on the future of Los Angeles and its art world.)

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Cornel West (Professor of Religion and director of Afro-American Studies at Princeton University, talks about religion, rap music and the crisis of black leadership.)

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Steven Rockefeller (Philosopher and educator at Middlebury College in Vermont discusses spiritual democracy.)

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Mike Rose (Author of *Lives on the Boundary* and associated director of Writing Programs at UCLA.)

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Seymour Melman (Professor Emeritus of Industrial Engineering at Columbia University and Chair of the National Commission for Economic Conversion and Disarmament.)

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Evelyn Fox Keller (Theoretical physicist in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley.)

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Joanne Ciulla (Teacher of Business Ethics and Management at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.)

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Michael Sandel (Professor of Political Philosophy at Harvard University's Department of Government.)

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Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris (Louise Erdrich is author of the novels, *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*, and the book of poems, *Baptism of Desire*; Michael Dorris is the winner of the 1989 National Book Critics Circle Award for his book, *The Broken Chord*. Featured together in this new episode, the Native American authors are also husband and wife.)

6/3/90 #218

Bharati Mukherjee (Indian author and teacher; winner of the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for her book of short stories, *The Middleman*, and author of the novel, *Jasmine*; teacher at the Uni-