



# Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa

*Rigoberto González*

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## **Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa** Rigoberto González

Heartbreaking, poetic, and intensely personal, *Butterfly Boy* is a unique coming out and coming-of-age story of a first-generation Chicano who trades one life for another, only to discover that history and memory are not exchangeable or forgettable.

Growing up among poor migrant Mexican farmworkers, Rigoberto González also faces the pressure of coming-of-age as a gay man in a culture that prizes machismo. Losing his mother when he is twelve, González must then confront his father's abandonment and an abiding sense of cultural estrangement, both from his adopted home in the United States and from a Mexican birthright. His only sense of connection gets forged in a violent relationship with an older man. By finding his calling as a writer, and by revisiting the relationship with his father during a trip to Mexico, González finally claims his identity at the intersection of race, class, and sexuality. The result is a leap of faith that every reader who ever felt like an outsider will immediately recognize.

2007 Finalist, Randy Shilts Awards for Gay Nonfiction, Publishing Triangle Winner, American Book Awards, Before Columbus Foundation

## **Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa Details**

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## **From Reader Review Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa for online ebook**

### **Dani says**

This book was nothing of what I expected. I haven't decided if that's a pro or a con. I enjoyed reading this literature nonetheless. I just had a hard time reconciling missing pieces to the puzzle and debating whether or not I truly was in love with the story.

I think it touched on very important themes of culture, sexuality, belonging, and identity. I could identify with some of the parts where the main character was cast aside due to his cultural heritage. I could also identify strongly with some of the family issues that one must keep secret. Walking around with such big topics and secrets at a young age is a daunting task!! The pieces about the intimate partner violence made me cringe. The author wrote those pieces in such a way that it made me clearly envision what was happening. I had so many questions about those aspects of his relationship.

All in all, it was a great read but with some missing pieces. I do feel though that those missing pieces had to do with the pieces of himself that he is missing or loses throughout the course of his life. I really enjoyed reading the book and would definitely read it again-missing pieces and all. :)

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### **Debs says**

2.75 stars

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### **Albie says**

Enjoyable book but not what I thought it would be

Story : for a book about coming out and being a gay Mexican, the book has very little to do with that topic. I was kind of hoping/expecting some sort of section in the book where he has to confront his dad but that never happened :/ it is very well written and a downer but don't expect too much about his homosexual life in a Mexican society.

Characters : Rigoberto is a lost kid. He talks about his life, the past and his current and its a real downer. He was lost then and he is lost until the very end.

Final Words : If you're interested in knowing the struggles and pains of being among a giant Mexican family, trying to make it in the US, moving back when things get tough, then this is a good read. It feels very real and you can easily picture yourself in that situation. I do wish it was longer, so it can get to the stuff that I wanted answered but maybe it never happened because sadly, homosexuality within the Mexican society is still not quite acceptable, especially back then.

7.5 out of 10

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## Neil Grayson says

I'm starting to notice a trend with memoir: for the first half, I roll my eyes at the melodrama of the speaker, but I eventually grow to love them and care about their pain, putting aside whatever bullshit that stands between me and empathy. That's what I'm learning most, I guess. That reading memoir is, more so than fiction, I'd argue, an act of empathy.

Giving this book three stars (and any star review, really) isn't a measure of its quality, or lack thereof. It's a measure of how enjoyable an experience I had while reading it.

The book is well-structured. The bus ride with the father creates excellent dramatic tension between flashbacks, which occupy most of the book. I didn't find my experience to be hugely enjoyable, but that was largely for personal reasons. I feel like the country's falling apart and can't bring myself to care about this guy whining. That's a problem. So many memoirs sound like catharsis. And while that is beautiful and good, it doesn't always make for reading material that I want to consume. I'm really glad he wrote this book. I'm glad I read it, too. But I can't enjoy it right now.

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## John LaPine says

simple, honest language discusses a gay man's three day long bus trip home with his father from the US to their hometown in Mexico. not the worst, but far from fantastic

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## X says

This is a heartbreaking memoir about growing up as the queer "sissy" Chicano son and grandson of farmworkers in Indio, CA and Zacapu, Michoacan (my parents' pueblito is right next to that city). He writes about surviving violence, rape, anger, overeating, poverty, farmwork child labor, his mother passing away from a heart condition at age 12, his father abandoning him after her death to marry another woman and start another family, his escape to college, and more. The non-linear structure is quite moving in the sense that he writes about his childhood in chronological order yet inserts bits of a longer narrative about traveling back to Michoacan with his father at 20 years old and an abusive relationship with an ex-lover. He reveals his pain with clarity and honesty. He does not absolve accountability for those who harmed him. His anger and resentment is not resolved by the end and in a way I am thankful for that. Sometimes the trauma and pain doesn't ever go away and it isn't resolved and we learn how to manage with it (or not). Thank you Roberito Gonzalez.

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## Brandon Meredith says

Best line from this review:

Sex is the leitmotif that is played each time the author's father makes an appearance.

Review: Very pleasantly surprised by this book. I'm reading it for a gay and lesbian book club, and I was expecting either a dry portrayal of gay, middle class Chicano culture or perhaps a boilerplate, flighty gay romance novel. Instead I found a literary work that is both interesting and compelling. In particular, the depiction of impoverished American farmworker life surprised and excited me considerably.

The gay central character made this story very relatable for me, but it is the undercurrent of economic narrative that makes this work novel. As an East Coast-er, the idea of an economic underclass, of which many are American citizens, that roams up and down the country taking less-than-subsistence jobs is horrifying. And as recently as the 80s? Perhaps I am naive, but this is not the story of America that I have been fed.

I'm guessing that something similar continues today. And this sheds new light for me on the issue of black economic repression, which I am more familiar with. I look forward to learning more. It's truly amazing what good storytelling can do to clarify a complex issue.

I'm surprised by how the families in the story seem so trapped in their depressed economic state when they live so close to the immense wealth and opportunity in America. And I don't mean the immense wealth of the few celebrities with places in Palm Springs that were mentioned in the book. I mean the wealth of even a lower-middle class family of Southern California, the members of which would never dream of falling so low as to live in some of the conditions described in the book.

How could a household of 18 not manage to afford their home? Why couldn't the author get an after school job at the mall like the white students? How is it that the white kids in their community were so much better off?

I suppose my failure of imagination has been supplanted by the author's able descriptions of the realities of the poorest in America growing up roughly when I did. Really amazing.

As for the rest of the tale, the descriptions of sex are wrapped up in shocking violence, in marked contrast to the author's self-description as a "mariposa," a butterfly boy. The relationships of everyone in the book seem incredibly unhealthy, lacking boundaries, basic empathy, and compassion.

And the author's relationship with his father is so disturbingly enmeshed with sex. Sex is the leitmotif that is played each time his father makes an appearance. This caused me to consider the author's Electra complex each time he portrays a tryst. It's as if his two fetishes are ... violence and his father.

The literary quality is high but not overwhelming. While the book is the life story of a 19 year old (necessarily quite short), the writing is surprisingly mature. There are moments of brilliance in the book, though I often found some of his metaphors and imagery either trite or too precious. I'm glad they're there, all the same. He may have overreached with a few of them, but at least he reached. And had he not reached, we may not have gotten those moments of brilliance.

I'll end this review with a few of my favorite quotes:

"My grandfather's was the voice with the fury of a pickaxe."

"How the hell do you prove it when you're lying there cross-eyed like a billy goat on a puddle of your own drool?"

"And for the first time I recognized the look of mutual attraction from a distance."

"I found this on top of my cat. Some bastard killed him. And since I can't read, can you tell me what this says?"

"Now leave me alone before I burn your balls off."

Grandmother with a gun: "The day I'm sick and useless I'm putting this to my head." This is why my relatives hide the guns when old people get sick!

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### **Kate says**

Rigoberto weaves his story around a bus trip from America to Mexico with his father. He expertly juggles multiple layers and multiple themes into a compelling but at times grueling read. His use of non-linear story telling, while at times can make time orientation within the story difficult, also serves to highlight the recurring themes in his life and his continuous struggle to understand what was happening. I felt, as the reader, that I was discovering deeper elements and gaining an understanding right along side the author as he recounted his tale. That skill to invest the reader in the story and draw them along on what feels like a mutual path to deeper discovery is a mark of a skilled author and a great book.

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### **Susan says**

It's difficult to find anything more appropriate to say about this book than the first few words on the dust jacket: it is "heartbreaking, poetic, and intensely personal." González, a young gay Chicano who has escaped his migrant farm-worker family to attend college at U. C. Riverside, finds himself with an older, violent lover. As he struggles to make sense of his past and his present, González tries leaving the lover, making a trip with his father to visit his maternal grandparents in Mexico. González shares with us his most intimate thoughts about his turbulent relationship with his father and paternal grandfather; his abiding love for the mother who died when he was young; and his painful ongoing attempts to forgive himself for the things that have happened in his life and to figure out who he is going to be from this point on. The book was published when González was 36, but the story ends while he is still in his 20's, and the voice feels authentic for that age.

I was thrilled to discover that González is now a successful and recognized author and teacher, as well as a mentor to younger writers. Clearly, he found a way out of the torment this book describes, and has been able to use it to enrich the lives of others. It's a rich, powerful coming-of-age story.

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### **Cy says**

a really beautifully written but heartbreaking memoir.

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## jo says

there is a noble tradition in memoir writing, a tradition that is basically never violated, and that tradition is that you have to leave the reader with something that is not abject misery. however much travail and pain you go through, there must be *something* at the end that is good and solid and a glimmer of hope.

*Butterfly Boy* does follow the tradition but only just. this book starts off with serious pain and traces a life trajectory of pain. what makes it not a painful book to read is that it's fucking beautiful. i mean, it's gorgeous.

pain marks the narrator's personal story of queerness, and the slow reveal that masochism was built into his queerness from the start. the extraordinary scenes in which the narrator describes his first sexual experiences with older men are both brutal and tender. he needs to be owned, and fucked, and abandoned. he doesn't tell us why (he doesn't tell us many whys) but his life has been hard and poor and fraught with abandonment, and sometimes being owned and fucked is the best love one can get.

there is tremendous longing here, for a mother, for a father, for a lover, for a country, for financial security, for a culture, for belonging. chicano literature at its finest. repeated border crossings with families spread all over the place. crushing poverty. exploitative labor. rough family loving. cerveza. absent fathers who still love but whose love one doesn't know how to digest. silent but present grandmothers. gonzález doesn't sugarcoat one damn thing. he's always running, and you ache at this running because it's not even remotely good.

the mariposa is both the chicano queer and the restless butterfly, doomed to early death. it keeps on being reborn, but each new birth just lands it in the same miserable patch of dusty desert land.

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## Antoni Blanco says

### Touching and full of honesty

I enjoyed this book so much. I relate to the parental dynamics, and fully appreciate the honesty in homosexuality with the Hispanic culture. Well done and recommend to anyone looking for a real perspective on identity, race, and sexual struggles. I loved it, thank you for your story.

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## Ming says

This book is so beautifully written. There are parts in this book that are achingly poetic and emotionally wrenching. González writes a memoir that has a certain precision which exposes painful memories and raw insights. I had to stop reading after the first chapter or two, immobilized by the physical violence. It felt like a "given," and perhaps somehow acceptable. I'm so glad that I picked up the book again and persevered. The physical and emotional violence is not accepted or acceptable. The energy of that aggression, first from family and then from lover, is ultimately transformed and reconciled but whoa, what a process. The last

chapter is devastating.

I find it difficult to write this review now because this book affected me so deeply. The juxtaposition of beauty and pain occurred to me as a reader from reading this book, and this conflict and tension are similarly very much in the book itself. Where was the separation? There is no easy or ready reckoning. The mess and confusion are simply there. And after experiencing this, I am left somehow still pulled, tugged into some sort of state of longing. Longing for what? Longing for the way González makes the ugly palpable and the beautiful ecstatic.

Here are some of my favorite quotes:

"My head continues to spin so I drop down on my knees in a dramatic display of grief. And how silly my theater is, I conclude, because behind me the apartment is all windows and clear curtains, and fully of the faces of people who have never learned after all these years how to rush over to a person in distress in a noble attempt at rescue."

"As I nod off to sleep on this first afternoon on the road to Michoacan, I promise myself that I will try harder at communicating with my father the next day. Promises are so easy to make in a warm bus steadily approaching the falling night. My grandmother used to say that in order to remember a thought, she had to go to back the place where that thought was originally conceived because place triggers her memory. By dawn the bus will be in a different town -- a different state altogether, in fact. Tracing the promise back to its source will be impossible. My father and I are both headed forward, at the same speed for a change. Any yet, we continue to go our separate ways."

"Cuentame mas de tu padre," my lover will request in the young man's tongue. And the young man will comply because Spanish is his weakness and because the only muscles that can move in post-rapture are thought and pain and voice."

"The helplessness of adolescence was maddening. I began to wish that I were dead, released from this anxiety that kept me up at nights. Once, when an earthquake shook the rest of the household awake, I thought that my own rage caused it. Since I now slept in the living room, no longer willing to share a room with my father, I was acquiring these special gifts: the gift of become as still and breathless as the couch, the finding holes in the shadows that opened up into distant worlds, and the gift of breaking the earth apart with the destructive energy of my heavy thoughts."

"His fingers, rough as his kisses, press into my flesh with a fury that will leave traces behind. But I want him to remember my body this way. I want him to love me into escape. When he starts with the butterflies I'm thrown into a fierce ecstasy that tells me I'm with another man's body, in another history that unfolds itself apart from my past."

"Where was my father at the moment? I had no idea. If anyone were to ask me that now, I'd give the same answer: I have no idea. My father moved so far from me I wouldn't know where to look. But likewise, I have moved so far from him that I can never find my way back.

"How wonderful it must feel to love a father so much that when he passes by it's like the sweetest reminder that you are not lost, and that if you should ever find yourself in trouble, all you have to do is wave him over."



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## David says

Thanks to the poetry of the writing this book about Gonzalez's struggle growing up is very absorbing. I could imagine the author sitting down to tell this story and prefacing it with "Let me describe a really difficult part of my life"- and that is where the story begins and how the story ends. The main character, who struggles in a poor Mexican immigrant family against domestic abuse, alcoholism, and homophobia, tries to escape this pain with an abusive boyfriend. The juxtaposition of these two pieces of his life artfully depicts a very frustrated vision of love.

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## Todd says

I have mixed feelings about the genre of creative memoir. On one hand, talking about oneself is about as American an art form as there is; it's intricately tied to our history of colonialism, religion, migration, democracy, and consumerism. On the other hand, it can feel solipsistic and self-indulgent and, frankly, a little embarrassing to read. But there are times when such a memoir is so tightly crafted, so arresting in its tone, so necessary in its content that any reservations I have about the form are left behind by the force of the prose. This is such a book. For queers, there's a standard "coming out" narrative, a sort of short-hand bildungsroman of becoming queer or of becoming aware of one's own queerness. Because so much of queer writing is centered on whiteness and middleclassness, the particular voices of queers of color and queers of different social classes are especially urgent at this potential turning point in our history. Here González weaves together the themes of queerness with abusive intimacy, father-son relationships, death, migrations and border crossings, coloniality and indigeneity, and masculinity. There is much more to be said for and about González's words and form, but for this brief review I'll just say this. In our time of intensified anti-Mexican, anti-migrant politics, as queer life has been reduced to celebrating assimilation, "sameness," and respectability, González's unabashed, full-throated embrace of the pleasures of gay sex and the joys of being effeminate, a mariposa, from the specific experience of a Chicano growing up crossing borders could not be more welcome. This is not an easy read emotionally, and not a happy story about coming of age or finding a happy gay life. This is the story of a Chicano mariposa navigating the world of his family, within the United States and Mexico, and all of the longing and unanswered questions that entails.

As a side note: I used this book to teach introductory students in a comparative/critical cultures major to think about ethnicity, sexuality, and gender at the same time. The themes of the book were a bit too arresting and difficult for students to focus on the sort of how-to intentions I had for the course. But ultimately, that ends up being a better experience for them than I had intended, as they are grappling with the realities of chicanidad, migrant farm workers, and gay sexuality without apologies from a man whose life this is.

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