

*Contemporary
Authors*

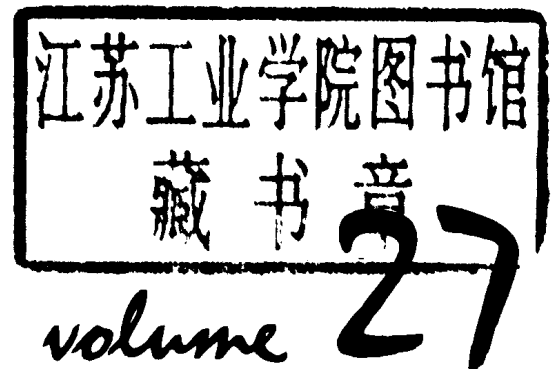
Autobiography Series

volume **27**

Contemporary Authors

Autobiography Series

Shelly Andrews
Editor



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Autobiography Series

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Preface

A Unique Collection of Essays

Each volume in the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (CAAS) presents an original collection of autobiographical essays written especially for the series by noted writers.

CA Autobiography Series is designed to be a meeting place for writers and readers—a place where writers can present themselves, on their own terms, to their audience; and a place where general readers, students of contemporary literature, teachers and librarians, even aspiring writers can become better acquainted with familiar authors and meet others for the first time.

This is an opportunity for writers who may never write a full-length autobiography to let their readers know how they see themselves and their work, what brought them to this time and place.

Even for those authors who have already published full-length autobiographies, there is the opportunity in CAAS to bring their readers “up to date” or perhaps to take a different approach in the essay format. In some instances, previously published material may be reprinted or expanded upon; this fact is always noted at the end of such an essay. Individually, the essays in this series can enhance the reader’s understanding of a writer’s work; collectively, they are lessons in the creative process and in the discovery of its roots.

CAAS makes no attempt to give a comprehensive overview of authors and their works. That outlook is already well represented in biographies, reviews, and critiques published in a wide variety of sources. Instead, CAAS complements that perspective and presents what no other ongoing reference source does: the view of contemporary writers that is shaped by their own choice of materials and their own manner of storytelling.

Who Is Covered?

Like its parent series, *Contemporary Authors*, the *CA Autobiography Series* sets out to meet the needs and interests of a wide range of readers. Each volume includes essays by writers in all genres whose work is being read today. We consider it extraordinary that so many busy authors from throughout the world are able to interrupt their existing writing, teaching, speaking, traveling, and other schedules to converge on a given deadline for any one volume. So it is not always possible that all genres can be equally and uniformly represented from volume to volume, although we strive to include writers working in a variety of categories, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. As only a few writers specialize in a single area, the breadth of writings by authors in this volume also encompasses drama, translation, and criticism as well as work for movies, television, radio, newspapers, and journals.

What Each Essay Includes

Authors who contribute to CAAS are invited to write a “mini-autobiography” of approximately 10,000 words. In order to give the writer’s imagination free rein, we suggest no guidelines or pattern for the essay.

We only ask that each writer tell his or her story in the manner and to the extent that feels most natural and appropriate. In addition, writers are asked to supply a selection of personal photographs showing themselves at various ages, as well as important people and special moments in their lives. Our contributors have responded generously, sharing with us some of their most treasured mementoes. The result is a special blend of text and photographs that will attract even the casual browser. Other features include:

Bibliography at the end of each essay, listing book-length works in chronological order of publication. Each bibliography in this volume was compiled by members of the CAAS editorial staff and submitted to the author for review.

Cumulative index in each volume, which cites all the essayists in the series as well as the subjects presented in the essays: personal names, titles of works, geographical names, schools of writing, etc. To ensure ease of use for these cumulating references, the name of the essayist is given before the volume and page number(s) for every reference that appears in more than one essay. In the following example, the entry in the index allows the user to identify the essay writers by name:

Auden, W.H.
Allen 6:18, 24
Ashby 6:36, 39
Bowles 1:86
etc.

For references that appear in only one essay, the volume and page number(s) are given but the name of the essayist is omitted. For example:

Stieglitz, Alfred 1:104, 109, 110

CAAS is something more than the sum of its individual essays. At many points the essays touch common ground, and from these intersections emerge new patterns of information and impressions. The index is an important guide to these interconnections.

For Additional Information

For detailed information on awards won, adaptations of works, critical reviews of works, and more, readers are encouraged to consult Gale’s *Contemporary Authors* cumulative index for authors’ listings in other Gale sources. These include, among others, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. For autobiographical entries written by children and young adult authors see *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

A Brief Sampler

Each essay in the series has a special character and point of view that sets it apart from its companions. A small sampler of anecdotes and musings from the essays in this volume hint at the unique perspective of these life stories.

Juvenal Acosta: "I go to teach, and I have in front of me all these young faces, all these eyes, all these hidden talents. What do they expect from me? Poetry cannot be taught. . . . Some of them have read too little, and some have read too much. They want to be poets. Who will get an A? who will get a C? I cannot grade anxieties or sadness, cannot grade an honest image. I will say, and I do say, be honest, stay awake, open your eyes, listen to the music of the end of the century, search whatever truth you want to find, write as if a demon had possessed you, love without fear, walk the streets in order to face possible epiphanies, stay up until dawn so you can understand, quit your job, hate me if you have to, but write and write and write. Your heart will show you the way."

Albert Cook: "I loved that house with its screened-in porch of seemingly endless length, its screened-in small summer house between it and the general store my grandfather had once run, its large, fragrant woodshed now become a garage, stacked high with wood for the winter, its henhouse out back towards the woods that stood across a field behind, its large kitchen around the giant black all-purpose stove where the beans were slow-baked unfailingly every Saturday, its bins for the dry beans and for flour, its large dining room where the family's early-nineteenth-century sampler (now owned by my half sister) hung over the giant rolltop desk that held all the records of the town. There my grandfather would now and then closet himself with some townspeople. Beyond the sunny dining room was the large living room, opening on the wraparound porch through a vestibule. It was organized around the console radio where my grandparents would settle down to hear favorite serials. Visiting the Robert Frost place a couple of years ago, I was surprised to see that on a slightly smaller scale the house where Frost set his first New England poems matched my grandparents' point for point: large stove, dining room, living room, woodshed, henhouse, woods across a field behind."

Edward Field: "As I write this, my world is on the verge of extinction. Everything is different now and I may be an anomaly, but I still feel that the Left, whatever its errors and ideological faults, generally has the best orientation for a livable society. The major theme in my poetry has been speaking up for the poor, the unwanted, the underdog, and by extension, the 'lower' functions of the body. True to my Jewish traditions, I write from the heart, though that is unfashionable in our increasingly selfish, market-oriented universe. When I started writing, I wanted my poetry to save the world. I saw myself standing up in the marketplace and speaking to the people. Later, I desperately believed, against the world, that poetry could save me. In spite of the evident truth that poetry can change nothing, I trust the instincts of the young

and why they are attracted to poetry, as if it actually could overcome injustice. It has to do with an idealism that gets lost as you get older, especially as you get involved in the poetry world with its factions and power struggles. It has to do with poetry as magic, the magic of words. I still believe it's a kind of magic."

Fanny Howe: "There were many women like me—born into white privilege but with no financial security; given a good education but no training for survival. Some of us ended up in cults, some in jail, some in far-out marriages. The daughters of white activists tended to become more engaged than even their fathers were, and like certain Greek heroines, they drove themselves to madness and incarceration in carrying to the nth degree their fathers' progressive positions. Because my family (academic, artistic) had no extra money, there was no cushion for the crash from a comfortable home into the literal cold streets. Somehow Carl and I did manage to carve a niche for ourselves—through marriage and new jobs luckily acquired—just off the streets. We were both somewhat conservative in our habits. No drugs, no rock-and-roll. Crossing the racial divide was the only radical ingredient in what we were doing. Basically we were in hiding when we weren't working."

Mary Mackey: "My parents read to me almost every night before bedtime; and during the day, I read everything I could get my hands on from the Oz Books (which I adored) to my father's medical texts (which included horrendous accounts of fetal deformities). Because I read so much, I came to school armed with a huge vocabulary of words I could barely pronounce. I did well enough in every subject (except math) to be branded a teacher's pet; but at the same time I talked out in class, interrupted the other students, and argued with the teacher. I can remember stubbornly holding to the proposition that the shortest distance between two points was *not* a straight line if there happened to be a mountain in the way, and no amount of reasoning or threatening could persuade me otherwise."

Len Roberts: "Two stories my mother used to tell us when we were young typify, I think, her younger years. The first one went like this: On a typically cold, upstate New York winter night, she had gone to bed with her sisters. It was freezing, as usual, she would tell us, so cold that she sometimes felt numb. Well, early the next morning, while it was still dark, she woke to her sister screaming and thrashing in the bed beside her. When the light was turned on, she saw a large muskrat in the corner of the room and then, at the foot of their bed, blood. The muskrat, which had evidently crawled up from the canal in front of their row house, had bitten her sister's foot while she slept. My mother could never sleep soundly in that bed again, she would tell us, and we, as children, knew exactly what she meant. The second story was less dramatic but still shed a good deal of light upon her youth. One night when she was almost asleep she heard some movement downstairs. Her parents were asleep, she thought, so she crept down the stairs to see what was making the noise. There, at the kitchen table, she would whisper to us, were her mother and father eating cake. *Cake*, she would hiss, that they would not share with their children, and which her wages had helped to buy. Whether or not my grandparents were such people, I never knew, but my mother often held that incident up as one she felt most represented her early life: poor, naive, and betrayed."

These brief examples only suggest what lies ahead in this volume. The essays will speak differently to different readers; but they are certain to speak best, and most eloquently, for themselves.

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Autobiography Series

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Juvenal Acosta

1961-

NOTES OF A FOREIGN SON

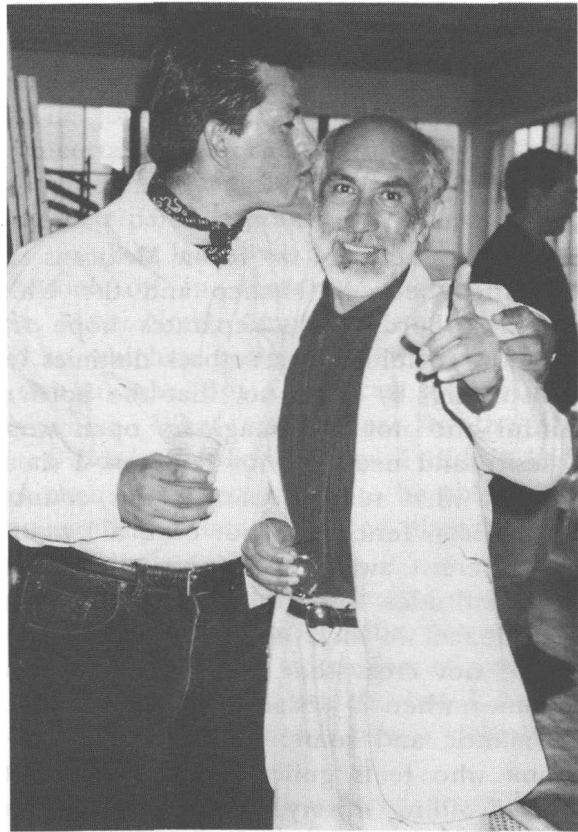
*For Gustavo Ramos Rivera,
a foreign son*

I am not a James Baldwin scholar. I came upon his books so recently that I felt somehow guilty when I had the idea of acting on the inspiration that Baldwin gave me for some aspects concerning the writing of my own notes. But after studying his bittersweet style and being repeatedly struck by the lightning of his noble rage, I couldn't avoid feeling not the right as much as the need to write my own notes in that spirit. A renegade's American spirit. These are, therefore, the notes of the bastard son from a foreign country who became the unwanted son of this elusive and unwilling "America."

*

When James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* was first published in 1955, I was not even born for my date with my North American destiny. Around that time another important book was being written in California, perhaps in this same town where I've been lucky enough to sit and watch the decay of my decade from the comfort provided by the shadow of these Berkeley pine trees. This other book gave—not only to Mexicans but to people from many different national, racial, and cultural backgrounds—important clues for the search of their own identities: *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz. It is not by chance—I hope—that I arrive at these two works. They are important pieces of the intellectual machinery that went into building part of the modern consciousness of our neighboring countries at a time when I need to search for answers to my dilemmas of identity in this California limbo.

*



*Juvenal Acosta (left) with his friend,
the painter, Gustavo Ramos Rivera, 1994*

Notes of a Native Son and *The Labyrinth of Solitude* converge in many surprising ways. At first sight one could be shocked at the idea that two writers from such different, and perhaps opposite, backgrounds and experiences could have something in common. But it is not in the land of the obvious where these two giants meet. What I find striking is the hidden dialogue that is established between the quiet, elegant, and eloquent Baldwin, who poses fundamental questions as he invites us to see his

scarred back, and the privileged and sophisticated Paz, who tries to deal with questions for which there has been no possible answer for centuries—answers just as questions are always timely. What they share is more profound where silence occupies the always elusive place of words and tells us who we, perhaps, are: citizens of doubt. Both writers are complementary sides of a tossed coin that is still in the air. Their reflections on the nature itself of identity and the issues that burn us when we think of these bastard sons of the northern portion of our continent, the Black and the Mexican, enable us to further the quest for answers at the end of yet another fistful of years we call millennium.

*

While thousands of my fellow Mexicans cross the frontier between Mexico and the United States—that border that separates hope from desperation, to fulfill their wetback destinies (and demonstrating, by doing so, that the border is a painful and not too imaginary open wound that desire and need do not respect)—I sit and think that what really separates our countries is not an iron fence and not even a language, but a different awareness of ourselves regarding our attitudes towards life and the degree of confidence we have about our destinies.

I did not cross that line “illegally.” There were times when I wished I had, but that is the romantic and somehow stupid thought of someone who feels guilty for having had the luck of avoiding misery. Since I arrived as a guest to teach in California, am I entitled to speak about that border that I didn’t have to suffer? To put it in a way that Baldwin himself might have put it, I say, of course I qualify: I am a Mexican.

*

In my eleven years since my arrival, I have had two radically different experiences of life in this country: that of the intellectual and that of the laboring worker. But what is remarkable in the first place is that I actually came to the United States, a country I had been taught to distrust, a country I had learned to despise.

*

I grew up in a middle-class family of the Mexico City suburbs where no one ever considered relocating to even another city within Mexico. Our background was deeply nationalistic, leftist, not very religious, and, of course, anti-yanqui. Our shelves at home were filled with books, some of which could have sent my parents to jail had we lived in the United States during the fifties: Mao Tse-tung, Marx, Paulo Freire, the diaries of “el Ché” Guevara, and a decent selection of our Mexican and Latin American talents: Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, Paz, and Borges, to name a few. There was no Bible on those shelves until I got one from my grandfather who rediscovered God (just in case) towards the end of his life.

Mexico during the sixties and a good part of the seventies was an entirely different country. At the time, outsiders saw us as an upbeat young nation with nothing but future in our hands and a rising economy ready to back up all predictions of prosperity. I was born in 1961, and by the time I was five my very young parents had managed to buy the house they still live in; they had the car, the white picket fence, two kids, and a couple of nice vacations every year. Does it sound familiar? I was raised (despite all nationalisms) on Kellogg’s Corn Flakes and ketchup, “The Addams Family” and Mickey Mouse. In a way, I was a North American child, born south of the border.

*

My father was some sort of immigrant himself. He had come from rural Mexico to the big city, the *Capital*, and was “lucky” enough to marry my mother, who was the daughter of an established Mexico City family. My mother’s sisters, four of them, hated my father. He had what middle-class people call bad manners; he looked provincial, was poorly dressed, and didn’t fit the profile most middle-class urban girls from Mexico City looked for in a man: He wasn’t white; he didn’t have a recognizable last name, and he wasn’t a doctor. He was not even a college professor, but a schoolteacher. Even after thirty-five years my father’s bitterness shows on his face when he remembers how one of my aunts brought home a white, blue-eyed young man, who eventually became her husband and

who in no time at all got the attention and considerations my father didn't get until many years later. His bitterness haunts me once in awhile when I face a mirror: I look very much like him.

*

Racism is not exclusive to Anglo-dominated cultures. I can witness to that. What was denied to my father when he married my mother was in turn denied to me. I didn't understand the detachment of my grandmother and my aunts until many years later. My father and I weren't white enough; therefore, we were not good enough. The only exception was my grandfather. He was just like us. He had come from rural Mexico and was lucky enough to marry someone's daughter. Like my father and me, he had dark Indian features, was a school teacher, and didn't give a damn about the petty bourgeois preoccupations of his wife and daughters. Grandfather Hernández was a painter and had a studio on the third floor of the house, and that is where I would go when we visited. He used to receive the most fascinating visitors at his upstairs refuge. There were times I wasn't allowed to be there for too long, since he would be busy with all the people who dropped by (in Mexico no one makes appointments to see friends). With the exception of my mother, the women of the family considered grandfather some sort of a drunken bohemian; he was considered a good-for-nothing who always disregarded the pseudo-aristocratic ways of his wife and daughters.

*

My grandfather became serious about painting when he retired from teaching, and then he simply died when he got bored after more than twenty years of increasing deafness. The day he died in 1989 I got a call from my mother asking me to come home because it was time for him to go. From Berkeley, I sped to the San Francisco Airport and made it to the hospital in Mexico City six hours later, just in time to see him before he died. He liked me so much that he decided to die twice that day just so he could see me. When I arrived at the hospital his youngest son was outside in

the hallway, pale and shaking. He told me Grandpa had been resuscitated just a couple of minutes before my arrival. He had died, but he came back the moment I arrived. I saw him and told him very important things I had not been able to tell him since I had left for the United States three years before that day.

*

I'm a Mexican writer living at the end of a wonderful and terrible century. Last week I "celebrated" my eleventh year of self-imposed exile in the United States, a country that most Mexicans don't like but need.

The journey that led me to this morning of uncertain California spring began when I was eighteen years old. Young Mexicans don't leave their parents' house the way young Americans do. But I slammed that door behind me and took off in desperate anguish and solitude. Many North Americans can relate to the void in which a person lives when growing up in the suburbs. But a Mexican suburb is probably worse. What made sense in the United States didn't in Mexico City. I didn't know it back then. It took me years to be able to phrase that anguish. I left barely on time; my brains had not died.

When I left I had in mind a lot of unclear questions and a specific project: to become a writer. I had no means of any kind in order to conduct my search, but I had innocence and doubts, which are a valuable tool for any young artist.

For three years I wandered around Mexico City, going back and forth between my parents' house and empty apartments, drinking, falling in and out of love. I mastered the art of surviving without any money. I tried to get laid as much as I could and used poetry as a way of meeting women, usually older than I, usually sadder. I registered at three different colleges and dropped out of all three of them. I was at war with my parents and drank daily. My body was skinny and unhealthy; love was out of sight, and the city had become a nightmare, its unsizable solitude overwhelming.

So I left the city and went to Morelia. Five of my poems had been taken by a little magazine, and by the time I got to Morelia I had copies of it in my backpack to back up my literary background. I arrived in Morelia as a

"Mexico City poet" and was befriended by the young artists and intellectuals of that town. It was a very important time in my life. I would just sit for hours in the city's coffeehouses, drinking *café fuerte* and talking Artaud and Rauschenberg, discussing Revueltas and Paz with my new friends. I went to philosophy school at the state university and became some kind of student leader. My life as a full-time young poet and bohemian lasted for two years.

*

I had come to the United States for twenty days in 1986 to teach some poetry workshops, but I liked Berkeley and San Francisco so much that I decided to stay a little longer, and then a little longer yet, though it didn't make sense to any of my friends or family that I should be here. Then I met a woman and life took over.

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What is it like to come to Berkeley from Mexico City? Well, let me tell you: I woke up after the shock of seeing the night before a huge Hell's Angel riding his hog very politely as I crossed the Bay Bridge from San Francisco towards the East Bay—the radio was playing "Hotel California" as I discovered for the first time the breathtaking sight of the city's Embarcadero. Then I went for a walk, and as I made it to downtown Berkeley I saw about a thousand delirious Deadheads hanging out at a park, a multicolored, dancing, pot-smoking, patchouli-smelling crowd waiting for a concert of the Grateful Dead to start.

*

Only ten years ago Berkeley was a very different town, and California and the United States were very different places. Life within the boundaries of the United States creates an illusion of self-sufficiency that isolates us: our relations with the rest of the world are always distant. We lack points of reference in time and space. Berkeley during the eighties lived some of its last bohemian years that gave it the glory that still attracts new students and nostalgic tourists



"My parents, Laura and Juvenal," 1988

in search of long-gone hippie or beatnik radicalism. But today, Telegraph Avenue is no longer that extension of the Haight-Ashbury of San Francisco; it has become a business battleground where the Gap and Ben and Jerry's dispute with the local small merchants for the right to own a piece of the marijuana dream that has turned into a yuppie nightmare. No poets will you find nor flower children, but nineteen-year-old Republicans majoring in computer science. They watch with distrust the homeless who stand on the sidewalks, leftovers of a generation mostly gone bizarre and Birkenstock or Berzerkeley with or without Noah's bagels with cream cheese and lox. People's Park, the piece of land that witnessed the micro-revolution that Ronald Reagan had the dubious honor of putting out with rubber bullets and one death, is the perfect site for small drug dealing and future parking lots. Berkeley has gone to hell by going yuppie style.

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Yes, I came as a poet but "a pen is not a spoon," as a South American writer once said. Berkeley gave me cappuccino dreams, blond love, and pizza by the slice—but no money for my words. In a period of less than a year, I became a failed apprentice of several trades: cookie maker, dishwasher, gas-station attendant, waiter, espresso jockey, house painter, and babysitter.