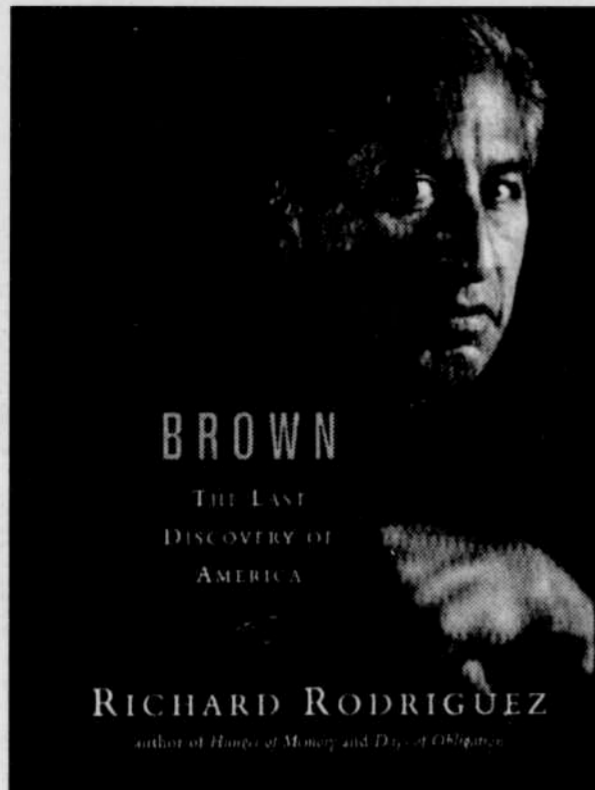


BOOKS

BROWN: THE LAST DISCOVERY OF AMERICA by Richard Rodriguez. Viking Press, 2002; \$24.95 hardbound.



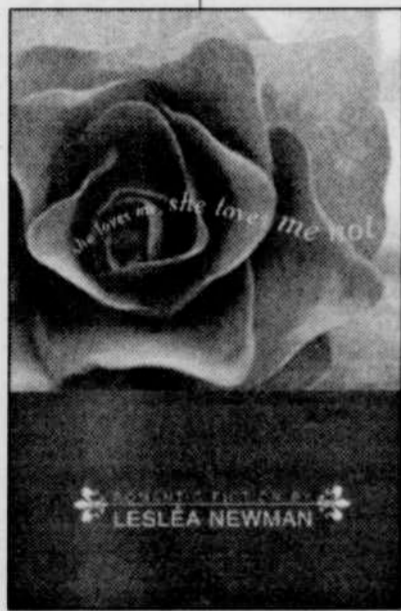
Richard Rodriguez reads from *Brown* May 17 at Borders

Richard Rodriguez writes poetically. He keeps his sentences short and sweet. Fragmented. When he hits his rhythm, the language becomes florid, flowing, evoking a passionate, at times erotic, imagery, a gush of emotion or an all-consuming idea—without drowning the reader. Faulkner edited by Hemingway.

The simplicity of Rodriguez's style serves a complexity of thought. Dispensing with the usual postmodern jargon, he deconstructs the ambiguities of U.S. racial relations and cultural politics by targeting simplistic underlying assumptions. Indeed, Americans have oversimplified, telling the story as a conflict of "black vs. white," when, Rodriguez argues, the United States has been "brown" from its inception.

But, Rodriguez asks, what is brown? What kind of brown? Red brown, chocolate brown, mud brown? The question goes to the heart of the country's absolutist racial definitions: the 19th century "one-drop theory" that designated an ostensibly "white" person "black" because of "mixed-race" parentage or the black honors student accused by his peers of "acting white." But then, he probes, what is "white"? What is "black"?

The insistence on racial purity quickly becomes moralistic, informing the ideologies of right and left—the militias and segregationists but also the separatists and multiculturalists; both sides demand "authenticity." Rodriguez—born of Mexican and Native American parents (or, as he puts it, the conquistador and the Indian), raised a Catholic yet living as a homosexual—



cannot respond to this call, cannot "choose a side."

Nonetheless, the market demands reconciliation. As a writer, he laments that his ethnicity—deemed "Hispanic" by the government, for which he thanks Richard Nixon with as much irony as sincerity—shelves his books in a special category apart from the "white" (dubbed "universalist") writers he admires.

He notes that audiences attending his readings consist mostly of Hispanic writers-in-training, while out in the hall,

young lesbians wait to hear the poet scheduled after him: "Why couldn't I get the lesbians for an hour? And the lesbian poet serenade my Mexican American audience? Wouldn't that be truer to the point of literature?"

Perhaps he might also lament this review, appearing here because he is a "gay writer." Then again, maybe not. He attributes his fascination with the ambiguities of "brown" not only to his "mixed" ethnic heritage but also to his life as a gay Catholic. In either case, reconciliation remains elusive, more so in the latter: "My brown paradox: The church that taught me to understand love...also tells me it is not love I feel."

As a writer, Rodriguez wants to speak to his gay audience; and to his Hispanic audience; and to the lesbians in the hall; and to the straight guy writing this review. He wants to speak to you, whoever you might be. And he wants you to listen.

Rodriguez will read from *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* 7 p.m. May 17 at Borders, 708 S.W. Third Ave.

—Kevin Moore

SHE LOVES ME, SHE LOVES ME NOT by Lesléa Newman. Alyson Books, 2002; \$14.95 softcover.

From Lesléa Newman, the groundbreaking author of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, comes a new collection of

Out on the shelves

Richard Rodriguez discovers brown, while Lesléa Newman's latest is black and white

romantic fiction. *She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not* pretends to explore a wide diversity of contemporary lesbian relationships. Eleven stories deal with a supposed taboo, each spinning a denouement meant to keep us on our toes.

In "Girls Will Be Boys," a young butch mistaken for a man gets it on with a straight woman; "Keeping Abreast" is about a butch/femme couple shaken up by token signs of breast cancer; in "Mothers of Invention," a butch reluctantly gets pregnant out of love for her girl; "Flight of Fancy" showcases a femme confused by her arousal for (eek!) another femme; and in "A Stone's Throw," a butch is shocked by her attraction to (gasp!) another butch.

Mirroring a stereotypical straight world, the bulk of Newman's couples encompass distinctly separate gender roles; it's a claustrophobic construction of mainly butch/femme lovers, who refer to one another as my femme/my butch and reject butch/butch or femme/femme action as unnatural and dangerously transgressive. Sisterhood is dead; femmes are represented as universally catty and competitive toward each other, especially in the presence of butches.

She Loves Me succeeds in bringing up an array of issues, but it fails miserably at mirroring the queer heart. It is awkwardly out of tune with a large part of our community. Thus, if you long for a text with room for diversity and play, stick with *On Our Backs*; if a sexy piece of prefeminist era is your cup of tea, this compilation will make you swoon.

—Els Debbaut

FAMILIAR SPIRITS by Alison Lurie. Penguin USA, 2002; \$13 softcover.

Novelist Alison Lurie's *Familiar Spirits* is a memoir of the revered 20th century queer poet James Merrill and his partner of more than four decades, the widely ignored writer David Jackson.

Lurie's style is always down to earth and stoic, with no place for flights of floweriness. She unsentimentally—though sometimes humorously—charts the pain and joy of the emotionally wary but hapless. Here, that style is applied to real-life subjects who happened to be possessed of more drama, quirks and eccentricities than most writers usually give their fictional creations.

The author hit it off with Merrill and his "friend" at Amherst College in 1954. During the 40 years that followed, she knew them both as a couple and as writers. She notes that both were independently wealthy and privileged (Merrill was the son of Charles Merrill, founder of Merrill Lynch) but chose to live relatively modestly.

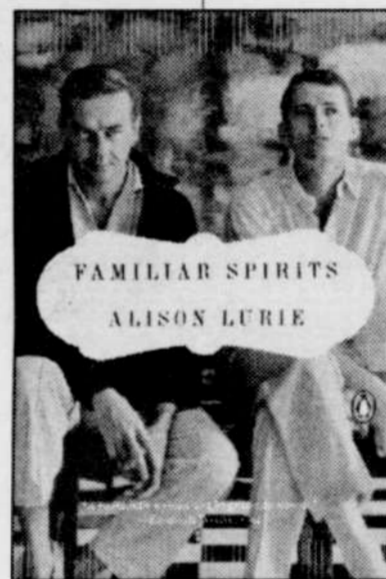
The couple also declined to join what Lurie refers to as "the international set of rich, famous homosexuals," choosing instead to cultivate aesthetically like-minded friendships without regard to class, gender or orientation. (Thrill-seeking Truman Capote found the couple "boring.")

The relationship was burdened from both an increasingly casual polyamory and inequality in the fulfillment of literary ambition: Merrill is now venerated, but Jackson's gift went unacknowledged by publishers, critics and audiences.

The two also dabbled in the supernatural—hence the titular "spirits"—as documented in Merrill's masterpiece, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. However, what Lurie initially saw as a bemusing experiment turned into years of eerie obsession and isolation, during which the couple seemed to prefer their supernatural friends to the tangible ones.

The author makes it clear in her foreword that she was not the pair's closest friend and that a memoir—as opposed to biography—is highly selective, drawn mainly from the limited resource of human memory. But the story springs from Lurie's lucid mind in clean, energetic bursts. Her sharp recollections hit the reader like so many poison darts: Absorbed quickly, they linger in the consciousness until we feel Merrill and Jackson's (and Lurie's) experiences—the exhilaration and defeat—were our own.

—Christopher McQuain



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