

MUSIC OF THE MILL: A NOVEL. By Luis J. Rodriguez. New York: Rayo, 2005. 308 pages. Hardcover \$24.95, paperback \$13.95.

In this novel of working-class life, Luis Rodriguez does justice and honor to the lives of those who build and maintain, harvest and plant, cook and clean to support their families and societies. Throughout the book, Rodriguez shows how people find creative ways to sustain the beauty and music of life as well as the dignity and rhythms of work while fighting for control of their labor.

Rodriguez's growing body of written work includes poetry and short stories on loving and working in Los Angeles, his autobiography of gang life, and his memoir/handbook about mentoring youth as they grow from lives of social disruption to lives of building social transformation. *Music of the Mill*, Rodriguez's first novel, addresses many of the issues faced by communities where conditions of displacement, racism, and deindustrialization have given rise to violence and strife. It follows three generations of a family: immigrant mill worker, Chicano mill organizer, and Chicana revolutionary. Procopio Salcido and his wife Eladia, the novel's first generation, leave Mexico to work in the United States. They end up in Los Angeles, where Procopio finds work at Nazareth Steel. Their son Johnny eventually follows his father into the mills, where he becomes a union organizer. The third generation, Johnny's daughter Azucena, comes of age after the mill no longer bellows and fumes, and she must struggle to find her voice in the economic and social void that remains. Each of the novel's three sections offers a distinctive tone and style that represents the context of each of the generations. These generational threads allow Rodriguez to illustrate how change overtakes a community while painting intimate portraits of specific people, places, and events.

Music of the Mill follows in the tradition of such classics as Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (Harcourt, Brace, 1946), Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* (Little, Brown, 1941), and Elmaz Abinader's *Children of the Roojme* (Norton, 1991), about immigrant workers coming to the United States from the Philippines, Slovakia, and Lebanon, respectively. Rodriguez traces the history of a family, but also the history of a community and an

industry. He connects past, present, and future, countering the nonstop forgetting endorsed and nurtured by commodity culture. Sharing common experiences among groups of workers across places, generations, and racial/ethnic groups is especially important as more workers are displaced by new technologies, made contingent, and pushed to become “flexible.” The rampant competition of an “ownership society” and the global race to the bottom have led to the renewed scapegoating of immigrant workers, whether Thai, Somali, Yemeni, Haitian, or Salvadoran.

The people who populate the novel are inspired by people Rodriguez has known, and their stories are historically grounded in Mexicana/o, Chicana/o, African American, and Anglo experiences in the steel mills of Los Angeles. Rodriguez shows how bosses reward and encourage selfish and competitive behavior and discourage cooperation and solidarity. At Nazareth, as has been the case at many industrial sites, union bosses shaped by a mindset of white supremacy help the mill managers deflate workers’ activism and disrupt progressive union forces with intimidation, intentional accidents, and even murder. This control ensures the mill’s true purpose: “Steel mills don’t make steel, they make profits” (61). The novel demonstrates how racism, and to a lesser extent patriarchy, has been used to undermine solidarity among workers, but it also shows some of the limits of narrow nationalism among workers of color.

Throughout the novel, Rodriguez emphasizes that women have been and will continue to be the backbone of family, work, and political organization. Johnny’s wife Aracely becomes one of the lead organizers among the communists who emerge in and around the plant. Their daughter Azucena comes of age as the tenuous stability offered by mill jobs melts away. Despite the “chaotic, uncertain, and shifting” world she’s part of, her sharpness and grit surface as she dodges her inner demons and liberates herself with the help of mentors, the reclamation of indigenous spirituality, and her own determination (261). Her emergence as a powerful figure is inspiring, and there’s no doubt that she’s an example of the future of movements for justice.

Rodriguez explores in narrative form issues that have also received recent scholarly attention. One is the continuing cooperation and tension between blacks and Latina/os as examined in *Neither Friends nor Enemies*, edited by Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and Gerald Horne’s *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (New York University Press, 2005). *Music of the Mill* focuses on relations between blacks and Latina/os at work,

examining interracial alliances that develop despite suspicions on both sides. Progressive white workers at Nazareth Steel also play a significant but complicating role. Turmoil and community develop along with growing interracial class consciousness in the context of common interests, despite the distinct histories between and within the various groups. Rodriguez's narrative style complements analyses of working conditions and workplace organizing such as Miriam Louie's *Sweatshop Warriors* (South End Press, 2001), Devon Peña's *The Terror of the Machine* (CMAS Books, 1997), Grace Chang's *Disposable Domestic* (South End Press, 2000), and, more recently, Vanessa Tait's *Poor Workers' Unions* (South End Press, 2005).

There are some rough edges. Some might call *Music of the Mill* didactic in its effort to impart a message, and some of the minor characters and scenes seem too neatly drawn. Obvious "bad guys" are positioned at times in a morality play and would benefit from more depth and complexity. Most of the time, though, Rodriguez teaches without preaching and shows without telling. When events or dialogues seem thin, his storytelling is so moving and the parables so important it's more than forgivable.

Almost all readers of *Music of the Mill* will be able to relate to and learn from this story of sacrifice, struggle, survival, and vision, whether they are from mill families, farmworker families, or janitor families, or from another class background entirely. Beyond just being a good read, this book will find its place in college and high school classes in Chicana/o studies, labor studies, comparative ethnic studies, political economy, and history, where it could easily introduce and complement "scholarly" works. Rodriguez has a gift for opening up crucial, concrete issues, and he helps readers feel and think about interconnected political, economic, and personal changes in battles for worker dignity and for understanding between generations and groups. Through the novel, a growing clarity emerges about how we might prepare to create a different world.

Tony Zaragoza, *The Evergreen State College*

