

Echoes of the Central Valley

A Chicano writer mines the “humanizing effect of literature.”

YOUNG FICTION writers are often encouraged to “write what you know.” That often yields stories that seem overly autobiographical, yet juiced by primary experience. The work is especially moving when the writer is talented and courageous—and if his empathic sensitivities reverberate in the rest of us, as is the case with Manuel Muñoz ’94, author of *Zigzagger* (2003) and *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* (2007).

Both short-story collections focus on Mexican Americans in California’s Central Valley, where Muñoz was born and grew up in a family of farm workers. “It’s very poor; there’s a lot of violence and racial tension,” he says of his hometown, Dinuba, near Fresno. “It’s a forgotten place—or a place that’s never thought of to begin with.”

The books identify Muñoz as gay and Chicano, labels that probably helped draw attention to him as a writer, as well as an early audience—which in turn led to honors, including the prestigious Whiting Writers’ Award in 2008. Much of *Zigzagger*, written in his twenties, articulates the world of young gay Latinos surrounded by America’s agricultural bounty while leading somewhat barren lives. The book was acclaimed by critics and especially embraced by Chicano readers who “welcomed me—and challenged me,” reports Muñoz. “They said, ‘What else can you do with your material to make yourself a proponent of the content? What is

your role as a writer?’” In answer, *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* follows a wider cast of characters and families in a Central Valley town that changes over a generation; the lyrical, interconnecting stories are filled with heartbreaking struggles to define selves, aims, and the true nature of home.

Yet Muñoz, who worked hard to move away from a life in the fields, is wary of labels. His debut novel, *What You See in the Dark*, published in March, is neither essentially gay nor Chicano. It marks his

uneven talents. One character is based on Janet Leigh, whom Muñoz researched exhaustively, and the filming of *Psycho*. (That aspect of the book stems from a Harvard film class on Alfred Hitchcock taught by D.A. Miller.)

“Having three women form the core, two white women and a Mexican-American girl, was not what I had planned, nor what people might expect from me as a Chicano writer,” he concedes. To grow as a writer, however, meant delving into themes outside his own time and place, and writing about strangers. “All the books I have enjoyed have inspired empathy for the life of someone I might not have known otherwise,” he says. “The best art always breaks that pattern of what we think is our experience. That’s the great, humanizing effect of literature. Chicano writers are capable of all sorts of things, not just writing about immigration or poverty or working-class lives or geography. I want to start new discussions. Here we have a Chicano writer writing about Hitchcock—what do we do with that?”

That’s not to say that the Central Valley and Muñoz’s experiences there are not still hugely influential. A major theme in *What You See in the Dark*, he notes, is “the way people in a place they consider ‘nowhere’ think outside of themselves through dreaming and imagination and fantasy—like that moment you look at *People* or *US Weekly* and read about celebrities whose lives and stories seem more exciting than your own.” The

Manuel Muñoz



novel weaves the story of Leigh's character with those of a singer, of a tired waitress "who knows she will never leave town," and of the hovering residents thrilled by proximity to stardom—and starving for recognition of their own stories.

Place functions like a muse in Muñoz's life: "Dinuba is a reservoir of creativity for me," he says. Every vacation from his current post, as an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Arizona, is spent back home with his family; he takes long walks, checking his memory, making notes of what's changed and how, gathering material for characters and snippets of story lines from neighbors and family members, all of whom still live there. "The place was so formative," he supposes, "because I was trying to escape it for so long. It took moving away to make me yearn for my town."

Growing up, Muñoz, who learned English in kindergarten, worked a warehouse job to earn money for clothes and school supplies. He learned of Harvard from a picture in the dictionary (he had looked up the spelling of "Massachusetts"), but it was not until freshman year of high school that he decided to go to college. (He earned only As thereafter, apart from two Bs in gym.) He reports that when he told a Harvard recruiter at a local college fair that he wanted to be a high-school teacher, the man refused to give him an application form, saying he should just attend state college. But Muñoz applied anyway and was accepted, with a scholarship.

He arrived at Harvard with \$80 in his pocket, having spent \$20 on cab fare from the airport. Shy by nature, he still felt lonely and alienated, as he often had in Dinuba, but this time it was because he was from a lower class, less savvy, and poorer than most of his classmates. (Being gay was another complication, because Muñoz struggled to come out of the closet and had not yet done so.) He completed the Undergraduate Teacher Education Program run by the Graduate School of Education, but he was drawn to English courses and then to creative writing, "which became a refuge" under then Briggs-Copeland lecturers Jill McCorkle and Susan Dodd. "There I learned that writing could be my life."

Muñoz's "writing was just beautiful; so much life on the page," recalls McCorkle, now a professor of creative writing at North Carolina State. "He is one of those

students about whom you ask, 'Does he really need to be here?' You want to say, 'Can you go home and just bring me some more of this beautiful stuff?'" She got the sense that Muñoz "didn't know how superior he was, coming into the class, in terms of what he was able to do on the page. He was so fully formed already; he only lacked confidence in himself to let go of the work and put it out there."

His mentors urged him to apply to Cornell for an M.F.A., which he earned in 1998. There, he found a "literary godmother" in Professor Helena Maria Viramontes—who, when Muñoz wavered over attending because it would upset his family, called his mother to reassure her, in Spanish, that her youngest child would be well taken care of in upstate New York.

"I give my siblings my books, but I never ask if they've read them," he says. When his family attended a public reading of *Faith Healer* that he gave for gay students at the California State University at Fresno, they sat in the back, "like they didn't belong," he reports. "But they got to see me give a presentation and answer questions, and the experience had an authority that I don't think they knew writing could command. It became crystal-clear to them what I was doing and what it means to me. I think they see now why it was necessary for me to be away from home in places like Cornell and New York City, where I had the opportunity to study and work, and how lucky I am to get to this point." The public reading also helped neutralize the fact that he is gay. "It removed the privacy of shame that can come along when you have a gay kid in the family," Muñoz says. "It's understood in my family that I am out, but we don't discuss it, which is a very typical Mexican Catholic response."

After Cornell, Muñoz worked at Houghton Mifflin in Boston before moving to another publishing job in New York City. There, he continued writing fiction and saw both his short-story collections published. He was not taken with the cosmopolitan literary scene; if anything, he says, he found other aspiring writers in his age group standoffish; when *Zigzagger* was to be published (by Northwestern University Press), they sounded unimpressed, or actually sorry for him, he says.

The Arizona job offer, in 2007, seemed an affirmation "that my books were seeping into academia, getting read on college cam-

puses in Latino- and queer-studies courses," he says. "A lot of Chicano writers bank on academics being our biggest champions, because it's hard for us to break past what those adjectives 'gay' and 'Chicano' mean to most people and reach a more mainstream audience." He also was excited about serving as a mentor to other writers, having had such good guides himself.

But Tucson reminds Muñoz of Fresno. "After living in New York City, it felt like I was going back into the closet," he reports. Some men he's met are fearful about coming out to too many friends; others are closeted gays who are married. "I feel like I'm back in the '80s here," he adds. "I mean, I have women checking me out because I'm single, don't have a wedding ring or any kids in tow. I never had any of that confusion in New York. It's like an out gay guy can't be living in Tucson."

The tumultuous immigration issue has also prompted him to question whether it's worth staying in such "a volatile state just for a job," and to consider his role as writer in confronting destructive narrative and myth-making in politics. He's been invited to deliver a lecture at Kansas State—the title is "Writing While Arizonan"—"a take on the 'Driving While Brown,'" he says, Arizona's version of "Driving While Black"; his talk promotes critical reading and writing as tools for social change in combatting political mythologies. "Plus, there's a lot to be said for maintaining my visibility as a Chicano professor," he adds. "The need for such role models in higher education is pressing."

In many ways, Arizona has many of the same social, political, and economic constraints Muñoz felt growing up in Dinuba. But they don't eat away at him as they once did. "In some ways it may sound strange, but I am grateful to be living here while these politics are going on," he notes. "Something about being here may be pushing me in a new direction."

"Being isolated doesn't mean being lonely," he tells friends. "If anything, this place has brought me much closer to art and art-making than I ever was in New York. I mean, I have an office where I go to work, instead of writing at a desk cramped in next to my bed," he says, laughing. "My tenure is dependent on my art: I am teaching writing. Being here is an affirmation of my decision to make art the center of my life."

—NELL PORTER BROWN

Comings and Goings

HARVARD CLUBS offer a variety of social and intellectual events around the country. For information on future programs, contact your local club directly; call the HAA at 617-495-3070; or visit www.haa.harvard.edu. Below is a partial list of spring happenings.

On May 3, the Harvard Club of Eastern New York hosts astronomy professor Alyssa Goodman, who lectures on “Seeing Science.” On May 12, McKay professor of computer science Harry Lewis discusses “The Future of Liberal Education” at the Harvard Club of Minnesota. Lewis also elucidates “Life, Liberty, and Happiness After the Digital Explosion” for members of the Harvard Club of St. Louis on June 5.

On June 1, the Harvard Club of Princeton welcomes Robert Sackstein, an associate professor of dermatology and medicine, for a discussion of “What Everyone Should Know about Stem Cells.”

HAA Reviews Classes

THE Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) is reorganizing the way it reaches out to

College alumni by focusing on generational class cohorts grouped according to related life-cycle experiences.

To aid that process, the HAA has conducted its first-ever comprehensive class-governance review, examining class structures, leadership development, reunions, other class activities, and other alumni needs; the results were to be presented at the annual spring meeting of HAA directors on April 15.

“This is not a ‘gotcha’ game of ‘How much money do you raise?’” says Timothy P. McCarthy ’93, HAA vice president for College affairs, a longtime class secretary, and a lecturer in the faculties of arts and sciences and of government. “It’s an ambitious effort to characterize on a much deeper level than we ever have before the landscape of alumni activity at the class level...with an eye toward integrating and fortifying the relationship among classes, the alumni population, and the HAA as an organization.”

The review, overseen by McCarthy and Robert P. Fox Jr. ’86, among others, has involved surveys sent to their fel-

low class secretaries (which yielded an 80 percent return rate), and a gathering of class data that includes histories on reunion attendance figures, gift-giving, and information from class reports. Class leaders and secretaries, among others, will attend the class leadership conference in Cambridge in September.

The reorganization has also created four new and more clearly defined HAA alumni-outreach committees grouped into stage-of-life cohorts: “Building New Communities” (undergraduates through fifth reunion); “Strengthening Alumni Foundations” (sixth through twenty-fifth); “Broadening Alumni Engagement” (twenty-sixth through fortieth); and “Maintaining the Connection” (forty-first and beyond). Previously, the HAA committees were “Classes and Reunions,” “Undergraduates,” and “Recent Graduates,” but “The ‘one-size-fits-all’ committee approach wasn’t really working,” adds McCarthy. “We need to do a better job at serving alumni at different stages of their lives.”

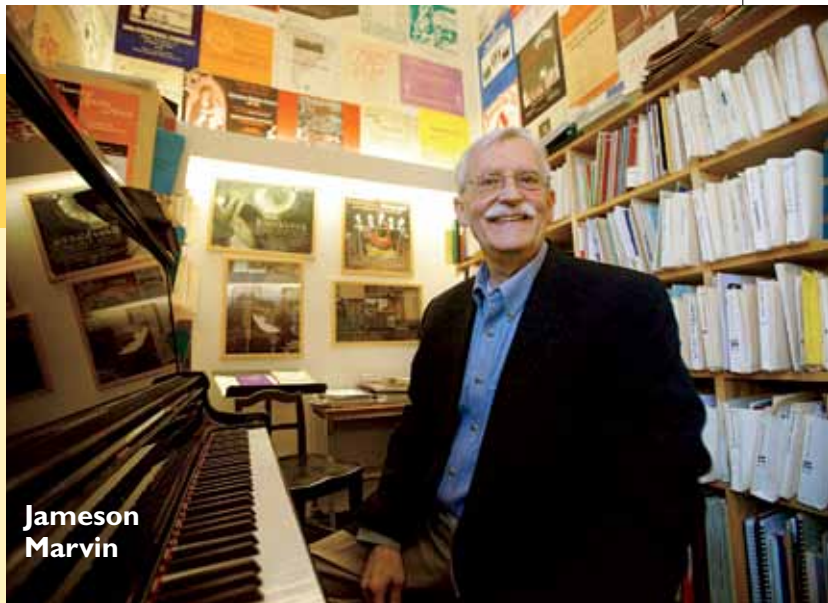
Alumni Sing Out

The newly formed Jameson Singers, a Boston-area choral group of 52 members—47 of them alumni (39 of the College, 8 of the graduate schools)—were scheduled to make their debut on April 10 at the Payson Park Congregational Church in Belmont, Massachusetts. Singing music by Brahms, Monteverdi, and Samuel Barber, the group will be conducted by its founder, retired Harvard choral director Jameson Marvin.

“It’s been amazing getting back into singing and not just using the muscles, but that piece of the brain,” says Juliana Koo ’92, the group’s manager and a former member of the Collegium Musicum. “I sang a little after I first graduated, but then life takes over—and if you don’t have it in your work life, music goes by the wayside.”

That’s a common experience, judging by the number of alumni who’ve joined the group to rekindle the passion for choral music they felt as undergraduates working with Marvin, whose tenure spanned more than 30 years. “I wanted to recreate the same high-quality musical experience we had at Harvard not only for myself, but for them,” he says. “It can be very uplifting for the audience and for members to experience that.”

Very few of the choir members are professional musicians;



Jameson Marvin

Marvin could think of only one. The others are mainly lawyers, doctors, or business consultants, like Koo, who seek a “great musical experience,” she says. More singers are needed, she adds; the group is open to members of the community as well as Harvard affiliates. Weekly rehearsals are required—as are annual dues of \$100 (to cover the costs of rehearsal space, sheet music, and an accompanist). For more information, singers and music lovers can visit the group’s website at www.jamesonsingers.org.



Visit harvardmag.com/extras to hear the Jameson Singers rehearse for a spring concert.