

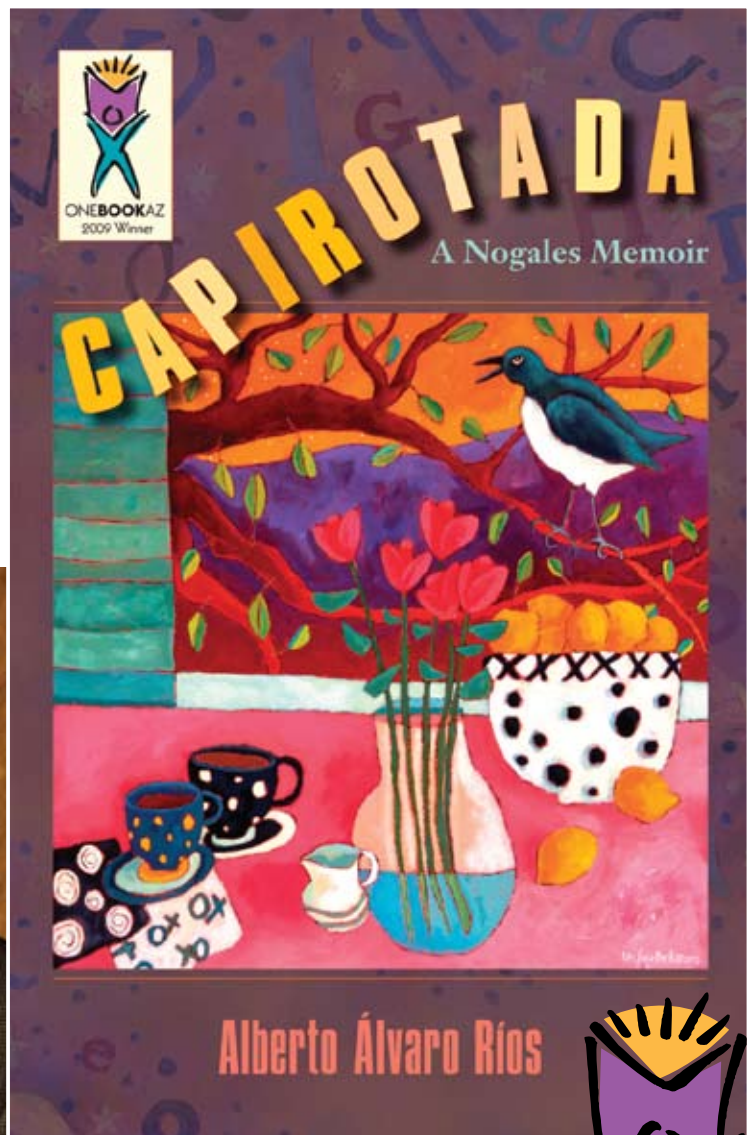
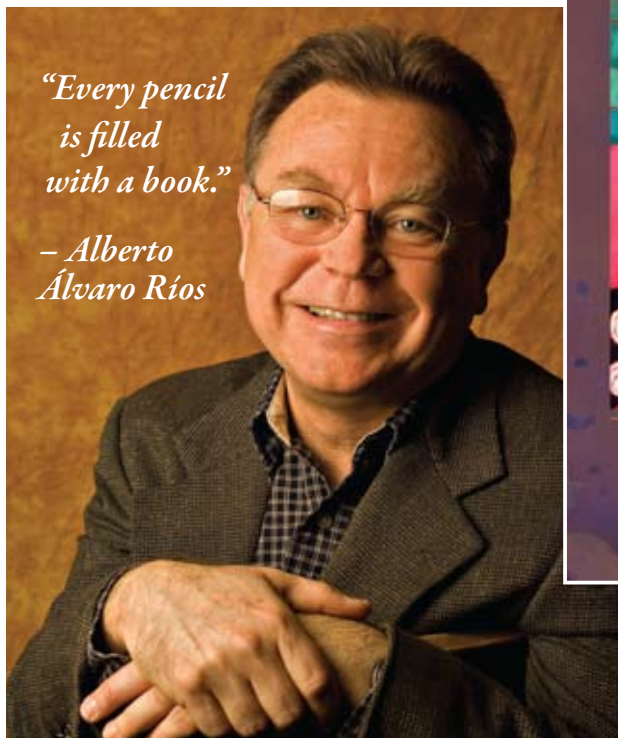
# ONEBOOKAZ 2009

## READERS GUIDE

### Capirotada: A Nogales Memoir by Alberto Álvaro Ríos

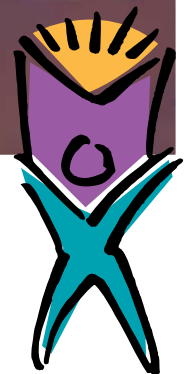
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Renee Simms was born in Detroit, has lived in L.A., and currently resides in Phoenix. A former Cave Canem fellow and PEN Center fellow, she has published in several literary journals and anthologies. She leads writing workshops for educators and underserved students across Arizona.



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# CONTEXT AND AUTHOR INFORMATION

In the eclectic borderlands memoir, *Capirotada*, Alberto Ríos reflects on growing up in the 1950s and 60s in Nogales, Arizona. There are two sides to Nogales, one in Sonora, Mexico and one in Arizona, which Ríos explains at the start of the book: “The town itself, which is where I grew up, was separated into two parts, the American and the Mexican, by a ten-foot-high hard wire fence. We lived on the American side, in Arizona, but my father’s family had lived on the Mexican side as well.”

From this first image of a town split in two by a fence, Ríos takes the reader on a journey through his memories of negotiating life on the border. The book details the cultural transactions that occur in Nogales and in Ríos’ family. Ríos, whose mother is British and father is Mexican, is exposed to many cultures in Nogales including American, Spanish, British, Mexican, French, Indian, and Irish.

The book covers a time period ranging from 1928 when Ríos’s father is born in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico to 1995 when his father dies. Ríos does not linger too long in any specific time or place but selects a handful of specific events to describe. This is characteristic of memoirs. Unlike biographies or autobiographies which require exhaustive historical research and documentation, memoirs focus on a few memorable events that occur over a period of time.

Memoir, which is the French word for memory, depends on the personal recollections and perceptions of the author. The genre has become popular in recent decades with the commercial success of books like *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt, but it has also come under close scrutiny in a few cases where authors have taken questionable liberties with the truth. Despite the controversies of a few books, memoir continues to be a popular choice for readers. Some celebrated memoirs include *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway, *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin, and *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston.

In *Capirotada*, Ríos uses different artistic forms to tell his story. Memories appear as poems, vignettes, photos, short stories, a letter, and a recipe. The use of prose and poetry, in particular, reflects Ríos’s interest in divergent literary genres. Ríos has published ten books of poetry as well as three short story collections.

*Capirotada* contains hallmarks of Latin American literature such as elements of magical realism, the use of both English and Spanish languages, and a nonlinear story structure. Ríos moves back and forth through time as he recalls his family’s history. Memories and events are unified by theme and not by time. He uses both English and Spanish words throughout the book. And in sections of the memoir like “The Bird-man” or the passages where Ríos “sees” an accident before it actually happens, events cannot be explained with logic, instead there is a nod, of sorts, to magic. Early in the book Ríos mentions the celebrated magical realist, writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

*Capirotada* also belongs to a category of literature about borderlands. This literature explores the meaning of geographical boundaries, cultural mixing, and cultural ambiguity.

While Ríos is a part of the borderlands and Latin American literary traditions, he is, more specifically, an Arizona poet. He graduated from the University of Arizona and he has taught literature and creative writing at Arizona State University for over 26 years. His body of work contains references to the state’s history and to its landscape. On two occasions he wrote inaugural poems for Arizona governor Janet Napolitano. His work appears in public spaces throughout the state including museums and libraries. Other distinguished poets associated with Arizona include Alison Hawthorne Deming, Norman Dubie, Jayne Cortez, Sherwin Bitsui, Demetria Martinez, and Jane Miller.

In an interview with the American Academy of Poets, Ríos explains why he has stayed in Arizona. “I could have done all sorts of things, in all sorts of places,” he says. “But is this the place where I can make a difference and where I need to be? I think so.” In his memoir about Nogales, Ríos makes us think about what it means to be from Arizona and from many other places as well.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the structure of this book resemble the Mexican bread pudding, *capirotada*, which is its title? Why is this structure effective?
2. What is the author's very first memory from childhood? Why is this memory significant?
3. How is Nogales different for Ríos today than it was when he was growing up? Has it changed for better or worse?
4. What does the border represent in this book? How does Ríos view borders? Are they dangerous or safe? Harmonious or disharmonious? Discuss.
5. Discuss the experiences that Ríos's parents have because they are an interracial couple. How do people in England, Texas, and Arizona react to the father or to the parents' marriage?
6. Discuss the recurrent images and words in this memoir. What is the point of this repetition?
7. What do you think is the most memorable moment of the memoir? Why is it the most memorable moment?
8. How do the parents who are from England and Mexico end up living in America? How has immigration changed or stayed the same in the 21st century?
9. Discuss a few of the cultural traditions described in the book.
10. What were the occasions when the border between the U.S. and Mexico were open? What were the occasions when the border was closed? Discuss.

# FURTHER READING

## MEMOIR/CREATIVE NONFICTION:

*Lazy B: Growing Up on a Cattle Ranch in the American Southwest* by Sandra Day O'Connor

*Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life* by Luis Alberto Urrea

*In A Special Light* by Elroy Bode

*Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* by Norma Elia Cantu

*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldua

*Going Back to Bisbee* by Richard Shelton

*Desierto: Memories of the Future* by Charles Bowden

*Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* by Edward Abbey

## FICTION:

*Writing the Southwest* by David King Dunaway and Sara Spurgeon, editors.

*El Paso del Norte: Stories on the Border* by Richard Yanez

## LITERARY REPORTAGE:

*Lives on the Line: Dispatches from the U.S.-Mexico Border* by Miriam Davidson

*Culture Across Borders: Mexican Immigration & Popular Culture* by David Maciel and Maria Herrera-Sobek