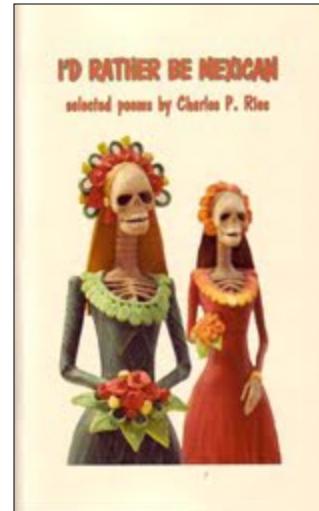


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I'd Rather be a Mexican
by Charles P. Ries
Cervena Barva Press
\$7.00 <http://www.literati.net/Ries/> (Poet's site)
<http://www.thelostbookshelf.com/> (Order the chapbook)

Review by Samantha Milowsky

I'd Rather be a Mexican is a delightful chapbook of poems that romanticizes Mexico and its people as objects to dream and ponder about life other than the one the speaker lives as a white English speaking man. The poetry exudes painterly and vivid beauty in deceptively simple lines. Readers are transported into scenes of Mexican architecture amid everyday life of sultry peasants. The poems are pleasantly varied between earthy surreal tropes, loving and heartbreakingly portraits of family, sensual objects of desire, and dark humor regarding customs such as bull fighting and praying. I'd Rather be a Mexican is a highly enjoyable and accessible book of poetry.



The first poem Just Stories sets the stage for a romantic view of Mexico and its people as objects to express longings. The women are "all beautiful" with "dresses so colorful they look like tropical birds" and the men are strapping in "tight black pants with silver adornments running down the sides of their legs..." This imagery of men and women occurs throughout the poems which create poetic repetition and reinforces a sense of place and idealized Mexican culture. The speaker asks: "How could all the happiness of the world reside in one people?" This rhetorical question hints at the speaker's dissatisfaction with his own life and romanticism of theirs. Readers will enjoy the humor and imagery that engages the senses. While on a flight, the speaker muses:

"Land has fallen away again, but I still remember the fragrance of fresh cut grass or an orange just sliced open and dripping in anticipation of my bite, but now I simply float."

""Put a pepper on his wings. Make him sneeze and watch him soar. Don't let him hide, he's a crazy boy," my new friends shout."

Just Stories prepares us for what is ahead in the chapbook: "All these words -- just piled high to heaven's ceiling -- they free us when we let them go."

The poems Los Huesos (the bones) and Birch Street delve into the speaker's psyche of family. In Los Huesos, the speaker sits at his father's and grandfather's tombstones. To honor them he brings his "father's tobacco" and his "grandfather's beer." The speaker also brings tequila and offers it to the dead. The poem is an enjoyable mix of family love and dark humor in celebrating the vices that probably did them in; after all, what is life without enjoyment?

In Birch Street the speaker's surrealist and romantic flights give way to direct and honest language about a relationship: "Her depression and

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my beer free our tears from the jail we carry in our hearts." The speaker implies dysfunction surrounds them in the neighborhood too: "Skinny, greased up gang bangers with pants so big they sweep the streets and girl friends in dresses so tight they burn my eyes." The poem Reading Octavio Paz is a beautiful ode to how Mexican poets have inspired the speaker. There is a sense of how deeply the speaker was impacted: "I close my eyes and see within myself a naked boy sitting beneath a vast pecan tree. From its branches hang stars. This canopy of shade becomes my universe." Perhaps the entire chapbook is a heartfelt ode to Mexico and Mexican poets.

Highly Recommended .