



Nava, Michael (b. 1954)

by Ted-Larry Pebworth

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Mystery writer Michael Nava has increasingly been recognized as an important novelist whose mature work transcends the limited expectations of a popular and highly specialized genre.

Nava was born on September 16, 1954, in Sacramento, California, the second of six children in what he calls a "tragically unhappy" Chicano family. He was the son of a man with whom his mother, then married, had had an affair, and though he was given his stepfather's last name, he knew from an early age that his mother was not married to his father, who in effect abandoned him.

Molested by a family member at age eleven and realizing his gayness at age twelve, Nava knew that he had to escape his mother's religiosity and his stepfather's physical abuse. The one path open to him, an intellectually precocious student, was education. Determining early on that he wanted to be both a writer and a lawyer, he attended Colorado College on a scholarship, earning a B. A. in history in 1976. He then went to law school at Stanford University, where he earned a J. D. in 1981. All the while, he was writing poetry and fiction.

In 1980, Nava met Bill Weinberger, who became his first lover. He lived with Weinberger until 1989. Moving to the Los Angeles area in 1984, he practiced law and began working for the California Court of Appeals as a research attorney. After dissolving his relationship with Weinberger in 1989, he met Andrew Ferrero, and in 1995 they moved to San Francisco, where he now writes and practices law.

Nava is editor of *Finale: Short Stories of Mystery and Suspense* (1989) and co-author (with Robert Dawidoff) of *Created Equal: Why Gay Rights Matter to America* (1992), but he is best known for his seven-novel mystery series featuring gay Chicano lawyer Henry Rios: *The Little Death* (1986), *Goldenboy* (1988), *How Town* (1990), *The Hidden Law* (1992), *The Death of Friends* (1996), *The Burning Plain* (1997), and *Rag and Bone* (2001). Five of these seven novels have won the Lambda Literary Award as the best gay male mystery of the year.

Rios is in the mold of the American hardboiled detective who stands outside society and, as a consequence, sees more clearly than most its dark side. He is doubly an outsider in all of the worlds that he lives and works in. First, he is a Chicano in an Anglo society and an Anglo profession. Although he is a criminal lawyer whose brilliance is widely recognized, he often feels uncomfortable with and condescended to by his clients and his professional associates. Second, he is a gay man in the highly macho and Roman Catholic Chicano society, despised by his father for not being manly enough, and distrusted by other Chicanos because of his education, his profession, and what they perceive as his collaboration with the Anglo society at large.

A man who is obsessed with his work, Rios is a relentless defender of outsiders who are otherwise defenseless, most of them young gay men who are victims of a homophobic or exploitative society. In the process of defending them, he proves himself a tenacious and insightful detective.



A portrait of Michael Nava by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

The seven novels are more than simply puzzles to be unraveled. Indeed, the novels are not plot-driven, but character-driven. What sets them--especially the last five--apart from much detective fiction, in addition to their highly textured and allusive prose, is the increasing depth with which Nava probes character and motivation. Rios is gradually revealed to be more complex and more introspective than most fictional detectives, and his internal struggles and his often tortured relationships with others are what finally provide the major interest of the books and lift them above their formulaic genre.

In the course of the series, Nava grows from a competent mystery novelist to a writer of unusual depth. And over the course of the series, Rios develops in convincing yet not predictable ways. He moves from the Bay Area to Los Angeles; suffers from occupational burnout; succumbs to and eventually overcomes alcoholism; falls in love with a young man who is HIV-positive and subsequently loses him to AIDS; suffers a heart attack; slowly comes to terms with his homosexuality, his abusive father, his neglectful mother, and his emotionally distant lesbian sister; is nominated to a judgeship; and finally establishes an unusual but potentially nurturing family within his Chicano culture.

Although the novels are not autobiographical in the events that they relate, Rios shares much of Nava's life experience, so much so that Nava's accounts of his early life given in interviews, and in his beautifully written account of his Yaqui Indian grandfather in John Preston's 1992 anthology *A Member of the Family: Gay Men Write about Their Families*, almost exactly parallel, often in much the same language, passages in the novels where Rios ponders his childhood and adolescence and his family relationships. As Robert Dawidoff concludes, the seven Rios novels comprise a bildungsroman, or novel of education, of considerable interest and power.

Moreover, while the novels often chronicle degradation and cruelty, they are written with style and grace. They betray a poet's eye and ability with language; and their quotations from and allusions to poems by Dante, W. H. Auden, C. P. Cavafy, and others both enrich their texts and place them in an important gay literary context. Nava's allusions to poetry and other literary texts are nearly always meaningful, and they add to the moral seriousness of the novels.

In 1995, Nava collaborated with history professor Robert Dawidoff on the nonfiction book *Created Equal: Why Gay Rights Matter to America*. Basing their arguments on sound legal and historical analyses, the authors persuasively make the point that the denial of equal rights to glbtq people threatens the future of basic constitutional principles of individual freedom and liberty for the nation as a whole. They contend that the struggle for equality for glbtq citizens matters to everyone because it is a test case for equal treatment of all citizens.

Revealingly, however, as part of their argument, Dawidoff and Nava present sexual orientation as an essentially trivial marker of difference. If people are treated differently simply because of something so insignificant as their sexual orientation, their argument goes, then the rights of all Americans are tenuous. This regard of sexual orientation as essentially trivial may explain Nava's uneasy relationship with the concept of a glbtq community, despite the fact that his books have won their greatest success in that community.

In a 2001 interview with lesbian mystery writer Katherine V. Forrest, Nava disturbed many of his glbtq admirers by limiting the markers of community to "a common race or ethnicity, a common language, a common religion or a common history" and denying "the idea of a gay community." He proposed instead the term "subculture" only to damn it: "I find the gay male subculture to be, for the most part, puerile and spiritually empty; so I steer clear of it." Finally, he shortsightedly discounted most gay fiction as parochial and sought to set himself apart from the work of his fellows by concluding, "I hope my books are not ultimately so much about difference as about connection."

Curiously, he seems to have forgotten E. M. Forster's celebrated mantra that drives so much gay writing, "Only connect," an injunction that honors differences even as it stresses the need to bridge those

differences.

Nava's decision to abandon the Rios series was greeted with disappointment by many of his fans, but the disappointment was alleviated by the news of a non-mystery novel-in-progress, to be entitled *The Talking Tree*, an excerpt of which was published in 2005 in *Lit*, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* literary supplement. Apparently a historical novel featuring a blind child as protagonist, *The Talking Tree* concerns atrocities performed against the Yaqui Indians by the Mexican government.

In his Henry Rios novels, Nava proves himself a worthy, if somewhat uncomfortable, successor to Joseph Hansen, whose Dave Brandstetter novels pioneered the gay male mystery genre in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Hansen, Nava presents an engaging gay detective living and working in a vividly described California landscape. Also like Hansen, Nava has attracted an enthusiastic crossover audience that includes heterosexual as well as homosexual mystery fans.

There is a major difference between the two writers, however. Whereas Hansen found a kind of liberation in writing mystery novels--testing the boundaries of the genre while also observing them, Nava seems to have increasingly bristled at the limitations of the form and, ultimately, abandoned it altogether. Nevertheless, his contribution to the gay mystery is immense; and despite his tiring of the form, it enabled his growth as a writer.

Still a young man, Nava may well establish himself as a mainstream novelist, as well as a chronicler of the gay male and Chicano experience within the boundaries of mystery fiction.

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