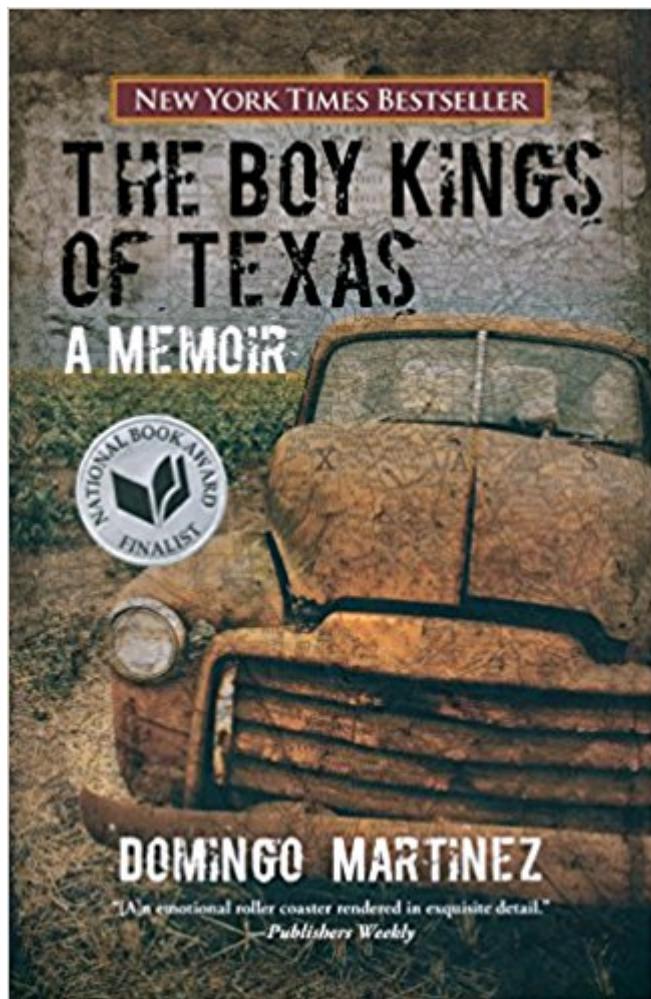


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# Boy Kings Of Texas: A Memoir



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER AND NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALISTLyrical and gritty, this authentic coming-of-age story about a border-town family in Brownsville, Texas, insightfully illuminates a little-understood corner of America. Domingo Martinez lays bare his interior and exterior worlds as he struggles to make sense of the violent and the ugly, along with the beautiful and the loving, in a Texas border town in the 1980s. Partly a reflection on the culture of machismo and partly an exploration of the author’s boyhood spent in his sister’s hand-me-down clothes, this book delves into the enduring, complex bond between Martinez and his deeply flawed but fiercely protective older brother, Daniel. It features a cast of memorable characters, including his gun-hoarding former farmhand, Gramma, and “the Mimis” • two of his older sisters who for a short, glorious time manage to transform themselves from poor Latina adolescents into upper-class white girls. Martinez provides a glimpse into a society where children are traded like commerce, physical altercations routinely solve problems, drugs are rampant, sex is often crude, and people depend on the family witch doctor for advice. Charming, painful, and enlightening, this book examines the traumas and pleasures of growing up in South Texas and the often terrible consequences when different cultures collide on the banks of a dying river.

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## Customer Reviews

"Old-fashioned, high-quality storytelling makes Domingo Martinez's first book, *The Boy Kings of Texas*, completely captivating. Martinez delivers a lyrical and unblinking account of life in the border town of Brownsville, Texas."-- Caitlin Reid, NewPages.com“Domingo Martinez writes like an

angel. •an avenging angel who instead of bringing wrath to a fallen world redeems it by using beautiful prose to turn the most awful and gritty realities into transcendent gems. • This is also a significant historical document, a first person account that reveals one corner of America as it has seldom been seen. What a voice, what a story, what a testament to the transforming power of self-knowledge and the right choice of words. • Carlos Eire, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, winner of the National Book Award . . . the narrative brims with candid, palpable emotion . . . Martinez lushly captures the mood of the era and illuminates the struggles of a family hobbled by poverty and a skinny Latino boy becoming a man amid a variety of tough circumstances. A finely detailed, sentimental family scrapbook inscribed with love. • Kirkus Reviews . . . [A]n emotional roller coaster rendered in exquisite detail. • Publishers Weekly "Old-fashioned, high-quality storytelling makes an excerpt from Domingo Martinez's first book, *The Boy Kings of Texas*, completely captivating. Martinez delivers a lyrical and unblinking account of family life in the border town of Brownsville, Texas. The characters in Martinez's memoir are brutal as often as they are lovable. . . . While it is hard to describe poverty in a lighthearted manner, Martinez chooses humor and wisdom over tragedy in his storytelling." • NewPages.com . . . Seattle writer Domingo Martinez's memoir, *The Boy Kings of Texas*, is a hilarious and heartbreaking story of a sensitive soul who grows up in the macho barrio of Brownsville, Texas. . . . Martinez has a gift for storytelling, with alternately good-natured and sardonic wit, and quirky pop culture reference points. • Seattle Times . . . With *The Boy Kings of Texas*, a new and important truth about those Rio Grande Valley border towns like Brownsville and McAllen has finally emerged, one that takes into account the brainy boys of the barrio who read *Cyrano de Bergerac* between waiting tables at the Olive Garden, and play hooky at the Holiday Inn in order to discuss foreign films. Sure, there have always been stories about smart kids who want to leave town or risk going nowhere in life. In the Valley, where there is also a high chance of succumbing to border violence, Martinez unveils the lives of smart kids who feel they need to leave town or else simply die of boredom. • Dallas News . . . *The Boy Kings of Texas* is a spirited confession in the tradition of smart, self-deprecating comedies about young manhood like Robert Graves' *Good-Bye to All That* and early Philip Roth. Martinez weaves artful comic asides with anecdotes about poverty so crushing that it leads to the death of his friends. • Texas Observer . . . This compelling, often heart-warming book explores how Martinez and his family tried to find their place in Brownsville. . . . *The Boy Kings of Texas* alternates between serious, often violent stories, such as the uncle who beats up Martinez in a cocaine-fueled rage, and

humorous stories showing his family's softer, loving side. Often, the most moving chapters combine humor with a dark undertone. For example, Martinez writes about how his sisters dealt with their own feelings of inferiority by creating two blonde, Anglo alter-egos.â•‰San Antonio Express-Newsâ•‰"There is no easy resolution to this personal journey told through a series of anecdotes that range from hilarious to heartbreak. Martinez simply splays out the different chapters of his life with a raw honesty that dispels the myth of the big happy Hispanic family and critiques the codes of machismo that lead to reckless choices. An incredibly engaging read and full of colorful characters that keep the writing vibrant. . . .â•‰El Paso Timesâ•‰"Martinezâ•‰'s story is heartrending and uncomfortable, but he maintains a surprising sense of humor that keeps his reader cringing and rooting for him. A starkly honest memoir of growing up on the Texas-Mexican border in the 1970s and â•‰80s, with a wry twist.â•‰â•‰Shelf Awarenessâ•‰" [The Boy Kings of Texas] . . . offers experiences that readers will find informative and emotionally engaging. . . . Empathetic teens will be engaged by Martinezâ•‰'s emotionally rich story.â•‰--Booklist

**TEXAS MONTHLY**  
**BOOK REVIEW**  
Straight Outta Brownsville  
Domingo Martinez was born in Texas, but he left as soon as he could. His very funny memoir explains why. by David Dorado Romo

**JULY 2012**  
Photograph by Adam Voorhes

What do you do if you were born and raised in a neglected rural barrio just north of the Mexican border? If you're Domingo Martinez, the answer is obvious: after you graduate from high school, you leave Texas and settle down in a city as close to the Canadian border as possible. Seattle, for instance. Once you're there, you find a therapist named Sally and tell her about your experiences growing up in a dysfunctional family and a screwed-up state. The stories Martinez told Sally, which are included in his first book, *The Boy Kings of Texas* (Lyons Press, \$16.95), are so funny and poignant that his therapy should have been offered free of charge. Better yet, Sally should have paid him for the pleasure of listening. If there's any justice in the publishing world, there will turn out to be plenty of people eager to read about her client's childhood. Though Martinezâ•‰'s memoir is largely about growing up outside Brownsville with an abusive father and an uninvolved mother, it deals with much more than the usual stuff that sends people to shrinks. There's advice on everything from how to cook tamales to the best way to transport marijuana from Brownsville to Houston. The book also offers plenty of material for readers interested in broader issues such as immigration, border violence, and other topical matters fronterizoâ•‰ writers have to deal with if they want to get published. But Martinezâ•‰'s sharp wit, deployed even during the most painful moments, distinguishesâ•‰ *The Boy Kings of Texas* from much of the writing on these subjects. At

the heart of the book is Martinez's complicated relationship with his father. According to his son, Domingo Martinez Sr. was a boorish truck driver prone to drunken fits of rage whom Domingo Jr., or June, as he was known, describes as "a tyrannical toddler." Domingo Sr., Martinez writes, liked to brag to his sons about his marital infidelities and whipped his boys regularly with little or no pretext. June was repulsed by the weaknesses and insecurities hidden beneath his father's veneer of machismo. He couldn't wait to get away. "In all of his life, all of his choices," Martinez writes about his father, "I was using him as a reverse compass." (In the book's afterward, Martinez notes that his father has since gotten sober, and he expresses some degree of sympathy for the man.) Ironically, the toughest member of the Martinez "patriarchy" is Martinez's grandmother. Her heroic feats before crossing into the U.S. as a young woman included killing two ocelots with a tree branch and fending off a would-be rapist with a well-placed log to the head. As a boy, Martinez wasn't sure whether to believe these stories until he personally witnessed Gramma pound to death not one but two rattlesnakes with a shovel. Now in her late eighties, Gramma might just owe her longevity to having avoided doctors like the plague throughout her life and turning instead to traditional herbs, prayers to the Virgin and Pancho Villa, and the occasional squirt of WD-40 to relieve her arthritis. Martinez's sisters are in their own way just as resourceful as Gramma. In one chapter he describes how, in the eighties, his older sisters dropped the excessive, foreign-sounding syllables from their names and reinvented themselves as upper-class WASPs. Margarita became Marge; Maria became Mare. They dyed their hair blond; refused to wear anything without Esprit, Sergio Valente, or Gloria Vanderbilt labels; pretended not to speak a word of Spanish; and began addressing each other simply as "Mimi." "The Mimos had made their decision to be two blue-blooded, trust-funded tennis bunnies from Connecticut, accidentally living in Brownsville, Texas, with us: a poor Mexican family they had somehow befriended while undergoing some Dickensian series of misfortunes," Martinez writes. The sisters' Mimi fantasy was a way to cope with the messages of inferiority they encountered in the "sinister world of teenage fashionistas, which, in Brownsville, was always tinged with border-town racism." Martinez sees the pain that lies beneath such masquerades, but he also appreciates their double-edged nature. Imitation is not only the sincerest form of flattery—it can also be a form of mockery, albeit in this case an unconscious one. Cultural assimilation, in a sense, is an elaborate, lifelong bit of performance art. Even as a kid, Martinez felt the attendant ambiguities that come from being one of the eternally "in-between" people who belong to two different places and don't entirely fit in either one. "They

felt I was not one of them, the Mexican kids, nor was I one of the others, the white kids, and so I adapted,” he writes. “But I didn’t think anyone was capable of understanding, so instead I parceled it out, compartmentalized.” And though he was compelled to escape South Texas’s stifling heat, entrenched classism, and big hair, he insists that “I can make fun of Texas, but if you’re not from Texas, then you may not. Sure, ours was an abusive relationship, but it was an abuse that grew out of odd circumstances.” Martinez’s eye for the absurdity of those circumstances helps him avoid the clichés and oversimplifications pervasive in the mainstream media’s take on the border. Though his sense of humor does get him in trouble sometimes. At a house party in Kingsville one night, a frat boy notices that Martinez is attracting female attention with his quick-witted repartee and grumbles, “Give a Mexican some tequila and he gets funny.” This was an extremely insulting thing to say • Martinez is hilarious even when he’s sober • and leads to one of the book’s many brawls. Martinez’s ability to draw humor out of hardship runs in the family. One year, when the Martinez clan traveled to California to work in the grape harvest, the dashing Mimis transformed themselves into Valley girls. They were the “hippest, cutest, best-dressed migrant workers of that year, and very likely for many years to come,” Martinez explains. “The Mimis had been capable of creating a real sort of magic around them, enchanting both people and places, in such a way that you could be looking at the same dreary landscape as them, the same terrible and hopeless event, and while you might be miserable and bitter, they would be beaming, enthralled, and enthusiastically hopeful. And then, if you got near them, or were blessed enough to maybe talk to them, you would walk away feeling the same way they felt, too.” • The same kind of magic shows up everywhere in *The Boy Kings of Texas*. The ironic thing is that as a young man Martinez was sure there was no art, no culture, and nothing to do in Brownsville. Yet his book offers evidence that the richest raw material for writers often comes from those parts of the world where there is absolutely nothing to do. Go figure.

Lyrical and gritty, this authentic coming-of-age story about a border-town family in Brownsville, Texas, insightfully illuminates a little-understood corner of America. Domingo Martinez lays bare his interior and exterior worlds as he struggles to make sense of the violent and the ugly, along with the beautiful and the loving, in a Texas border town in the 1980s. Partly a reflection on the culture of machismo and partly an exploration of the author’s boyhood spent in his sister’s hand-me-down clothes, this book delves into the enduring,

complex bond between Martinez and his deeply flawed but fiercely protective older brother, Daniel. It features a cast of memorable characters, including his gun-hoarding former farmhand, Gramma, and the Mimisâ€¢two of his older sisters who for a short, glorious time manage to transform themselves from poor Latina adolescents into upper-class white girls. Martinez provides a glimpse into a society where children are traded like commerce, physical altercations routinely solve problems, drugs are rampant, sex is often crude, and people depend on the family witch doctor for advice. Charming, painful, and enlightening, this book examines the traumas and pleasures of growing up in South Texas and the often terrible consequences when different cultures collide on the banks of a dying river.

I grew up in Idaho and this is my story. Macho attitudes live large in rural communities. We are a total white community that had families of five or more children. Farmers didn't need to import outsides workers in that environment. Young, macho and and what we called environmentally stupid. I thought that the story of the sisters getting all the attention and money hit home the best but, the story hit my home in so many ways.

He has such a unique style that's perfect for memoir. There's a lot of wit here even when he's describing grim things. So so interesting

This started out well but really needed some editing. The first third was interesting and flowed okay - maybe they stopped editing there thinking people would be hooked at that point. At the end of the book you find out that the book was based on his blog. It needed some serious editing to go from blog posts to a book which needs to flow from chapter to chapter. We selected this for book club but I was the only one that made it all the way through. Disappointing, especially since it was recommended by NPR. The premise of the story was interesting, but overall the book sounded like a series of therapy assignments.

I always enjoy understanding nuances of cultures with which I am not completely familiar. Given the numerous articles about our border problems with Mexico, I decided to read this book. It is excellent! I understand actions and attitudes that had puzzled me. You will feel as if you are a real insider. I highly recommend this book.

I loved this book. I like reading non-fiction and historical fiction set in places we visit while traveling

around this once-great nation. This author really does a nice job of telling what it was like to be a poor, smart Mexican kid growing up in Brownsville. For a first-time author, he has flashes of absolute brilliance. At times I thought I was reading a John Irving or John Grisham book. I recommend the book highly.

I did enjoy reading this memoir. It was insightful into a world I know very little about. But after reading the work I felt I had more questions than answers. Of course, it's a memoir, the conventional presentation is to "tell it like it is." There are so many powerful anecdotes with vivid portrayals of family members and friends, but what made the biggest impact on me were the occasional commentaries on social structure and praxis, brief moments of analysis. These moments rounded out the anecdotes and situated the personal history for me. Because they were few, the entire work fell a little flat in the end.

My family is from the RG valley and as a child I loved going down (from Chicago) to visit all our relatives every year at Christmas. I think he had a very dysfunctional family life which is why he needed to get away and find something else or some meaning to his life. It is very sad, but unfortunately true for him. He paints a very unflattering picture of the valley and Texas in general, but I don't think this was or is the case for everyone from down there. Many of my cousins are very successful and happy and returned back to Texas after leaving for school or other jobs. My parents and a brother are buried in Alamo, as that was my fathers wish to be buried in his birth place. I also have two sisters that have move from here to Texas. As an adult now I still continue to visit family when I can, and the valley will always hold a very special place in my heart. I'm very happy that Domingo has become very successful and look forward to more of his writings.

This memoir of growing up in poverty in a Texas border town got my attention early on and never let go. In this reflection of his own upbringing, the author paints vivid portraits of family members and friends and their places in the local culture, seen from the vantage of his own shifting impressions of them as he grows up. His sometimes harrowing tales of childhood in this Mexican-American town are compelling. The core of the book is the author's evolving insight into his identity and role in the world, his struggle to find and realize himself as he grows up, an effort that is still a work in progress. His depictions of himself and others are at times contradictory and unresolved, as when someone is looking at something at such close range that the shape as a whole isn't clearly outlined and the details sometimes seem contradictory. But that flaw of confusion bespeaks the honesty with which

he tells his tale. After all, who among us can give a truly consistent and unambivalent account of, for example, our parents and our feelings of them throughout the years as our relationships with them and with ourselves change through the passage of time? By the end of the book, rather than being presented with a neatly concluded package the reader sees the author as someone whose search for himself continues.

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