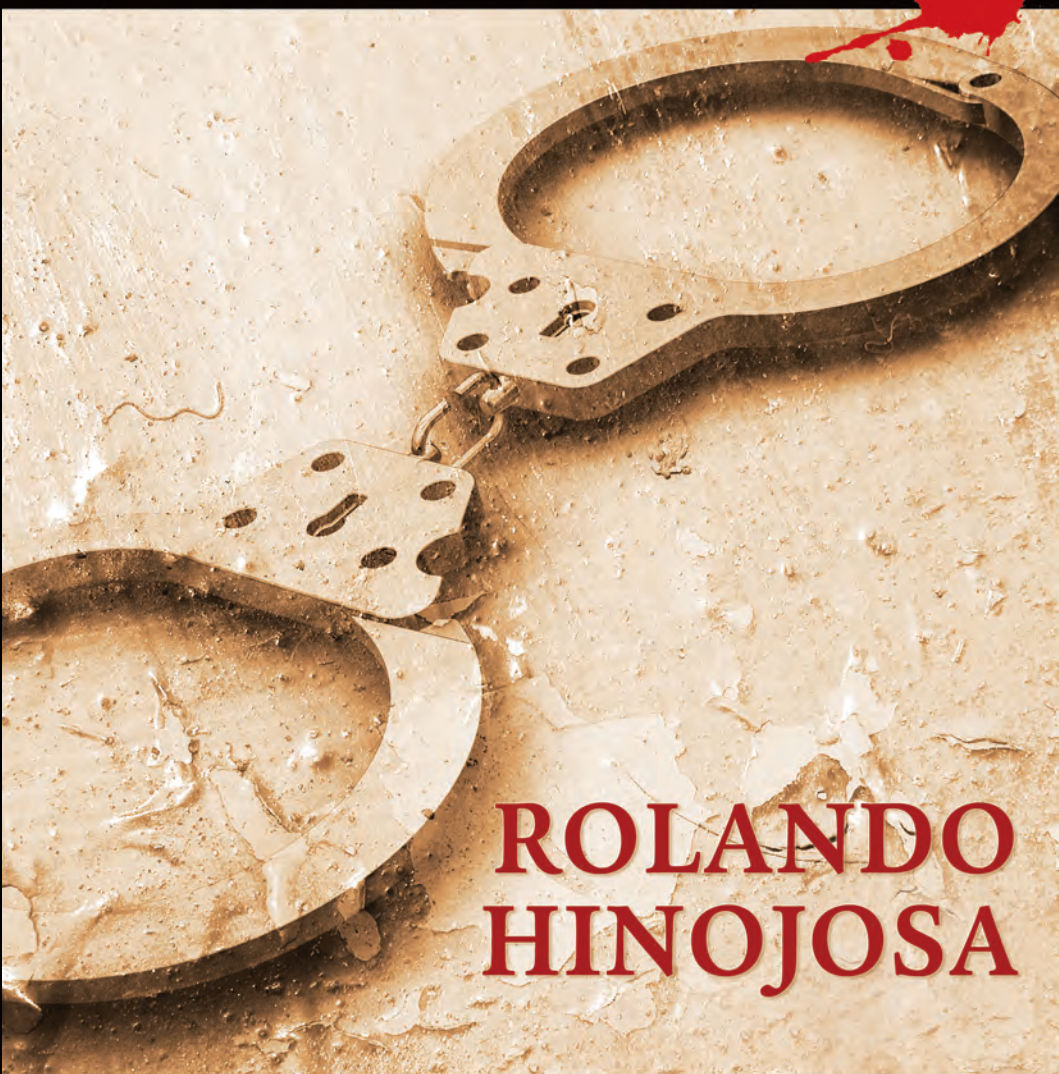


# PARTNERS IN CRIME



ROLANDO  
HINOJOSA

A RAFE BUENROSTRO MYSTERY

## Praise for the work of Rolando Hinojosa:

“Another unusual police procedural is Rolando Hinojosa’s realistic-feeling *Ask a Policeman*. As this case about cross-border murder and drug-smuggling unravels, Hinojosa gets to you in his sneaky way. He’s witty about the Orwellian bylaws in the middle-class neighborhoods of Klail City, Texas . . . and once in a while he nails a character with a single line of dialogue. Hinojosa is also mordantly funny about the local law enforcement honchos who queue up at the U.S. federal trough.”

—*The Washington Post* on *Ask a Policeman*

“Rolando Hinojosa has established himself as sole owner and proprietor of fictional Belken County, which, like the author’s native Mercedes, is situated in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. If Belken is the Lone Star Yoknapatawpha, Hinojosa is its Faulkner.”

—*The Texas Observer* on *Ask a Policeman: A Rafe Buenrostro Mystery*

“The timeless truths of war—the slaughter of civilians, atrocities condoned, legions of refugees—are related with near-documentary realism in this powerful novel of the Korean War. Hinojosa draws on his own experience in Korea to reveal the racism that Mexican Americans faced from fellow soldiers. Hinojosa gives us a graphic picture of the unchanging face of war—raw, gritty and inhumane.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Useless Servants*

“Hinojosa’s novel is in the form of a diary kept by a young Mexican American soldier serving in the Korean War. Its spare style, heavily spiced with military lingo, and episodic form are intended to recreate the fragmented process of discovery that occurs when one is at war. But what the narrator, Rafe Buenrostro, discovers is not heroism or patriotism, but the futility of war and its heavy human toll.”

—*Booklist* on *The Useless Servants*

“Like Faulkner, [Hinojosa] has created a fictional county (Belken County), invested it with centuries of complex history, and populated it with generations of families and a host of unique characters. The saga is a rich mosaic, and Hinojosa renders the collective social history of a Chicano community. Hinojosa’s tack in this novel is to dramatize how the community responds to *la mujer nueva*, the Chicana who eschews traditional roles and asserts her independence and individuality. [He] spins the story of Becky and her twenty-five friends and enemies with sensitivity, humor, wit and keen insight into the history and attitudes of the people of the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.”

—*World Literature Today* on *Becky and Her Friends*

“Hinojosa turns his Faulknerian gaze upon a particular family struggle, in this case a divorce. It is an opportunity to observe a master of voice and characterization at work, to watch a web-spinner weave a narrative masterpiece.”

—*The Texas Observer* on *Becky and Her Friends*

“Hinojosa’s largest Klail City book deals with all the problems of an emerging Hispanic culture: the use of Spanish as opposed to English, a growing political consciousness, women’s battle for independence in a male-dominated social order, the role of the church and the relationship of the Hispanic community to the larger Anglo world.”

—*Houston Chronicle* on *Becky and Her Friends*

“Themes which predominate and are explored in a humorous, good natured fashion include: the migration experience of Texan Mexicans, family feuds, the ongoing conflict between Anglos and Mexicans and the experiences of Mexicans in the Korean conflict and the Second World War. While Hinojosa explores the exploitation of Texas Mexicans at the hands of Anglos, his message is never heavy-handed or didactic, but rather pointed and understated. Hinojosa has an unusual talent for capturing the language and spirit of his subject matter.”

—*Western American Literature* on *Klail City*

“Hinojosa’s *Dear Rafe* effectively uncovers social, economic and political relationships along the Texas border. A mystery of sorts, it permits readers to make their own judgments about the reality of Klail City. The dozens of characters speaking in their own voices create not a babble but a sort of call and response pattern between cultures, classes and generations. With a quiet irony and persistent understatement, Hinojosa describes an alien place that is part of who we are as a people.”

—*Newsday* on *Dear Rafe*

“Hinojosa’s obvious and heartfelt feminism, his linguistic facility, erudite allusions and, above all, his witty, colloquial, epigrammatic pronouncements make this novel a feast for scholars.”

—*Choice* on *Dear Rafe*

“*Rites and Witnesses* has delighted and mystified [Hinojosa’s] audience. In the very ambiguity of the documents, his purpose becomes known. The issues are clear, the battle lines are drawn, the reader now knows that what is at stake is the death of a culture.”

—*Houston Chronicle* on *Rites and Witnesses*

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ROLANDO HINOJOSA



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And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.  
St. Matthew 10:36

*Virgil: Crimine ab uno/disce omnes.*  
Aeneid, ii. 65

*Latet anguis in herba.*  
Eclogue, iii. 93

Wherein a stupid murder almost ruins two days of saltwater fishing.

1

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A note, folded and scotch-taped to the telephone dial; he could hardly miss it, and it contained no surprise, either: “Oakland 3, Reds 1. I now owe you \$20.” It was signed C.

The C stood for Culley Donovan, his partner and chief of detectives for the Belken County Homicide Squad.

Rafe Buenrostro smiled, opened a side drawer on his desk, and slid that IOU along with the others signed by Donovan during that October 1972 World Series.

It had been a cool October in Oakland and Cincinnati, but it was a hot one in the Valley, in Klail City, Belken County, Texas. It was also a dry October, and the hot weather would continue as it usually did until Christmas or until the first norther came rumbling down from the Panhandle. But, until *that* happened: no rain. Besides, the hurricane season had been declared officially over by the U.S. Weather Service office in Jonesville-on-the-Rio. And that was that.

Rafe Buenrostro looked at his watch; the glass was scratched somewhat, but he could read the time plainly enough: 1:10 P.M. Now, if he could log in two uninterrupted hours of typing, he’d have his preliminary report ready for the district attorney’s office, and he could then begin his weekend fishing with a clean slate.

It had been a stupid murder, he thought. And here he was, six hours after it happened, putting it down on paper; and not

through a particularly enterprising piece of detective work, for that matter. Fell on his lap, as it were.

An idiotic murder, he thought. And then, not for the first time in the last eleven years, “Most of them are.”

He shook his head again, and he began laying his notes in some semblance of order next to the typewriter. He was about to type the report when Culley Donovan came in.

“Pitching’ll do it every time, Buster Brown.”

Buenrostro looked up, grinned at him and went back to his notes.

“Damndest relief pitching I’ve ever seen,” said Donovan. He drew two ten-dollar notes from his wallet and put them in the coffee drawer, alongside the IOUs.

“I hope you and Dorson enjoy the coffee; that’s hard-earned money in there.”

Rafe Buenrostro laughed this time as he centered the form sheet.

Donovan: “You know, you don’t know the first thing about baseball, and here you’ve got me twenty bucks in the hole.”

And then: “Is that the Billings thing?”

Nod.

“Tell you what, I’ll handle the telephone calls while you get that report in; you got your gear ready, Rafe? You packed and everything?”

“Sure am; as soon as I get this out of the way, I expect to be doing some saltwater fishing out on the Gulf. How’s that sound?”

Culley Donovan nodded and said, “I’ll tell you how it sounds, it sounds a whole hell of a lot better than Sam Dorson’s cackle when he sees the twenty bucks.”

Sam Dorson was another member of the Belken County Homicide Squad. Of what Harvey Bollinger, the District Attorney, was pleased to call *his* homicide squad.

The trouble with that *his* of Bollinger’s was that Sheriff Wallace “Big Foot” Parkinson disagreed—in public—with the



district attorney. This particular bone of contention had been going on for years, as long as Rafe Buenrostro could remember. He was now thirty-seven years old, and he had been on the force for eleven years.

For accounting and inventory purposes, the Belken County Homicide Squad consisted of five men, five desks, four waste paper baskets, three typewriters, three telephones, one clothes rack and Sam Dorson's long bench. Dorson had pushed it into the office one morning without any explanation, and there it remained in front of his desk.

There were also eighteen filing cabinets in the long room and other office supplies all of which, then, were paid for out of Bollinger and Parkinson's budgets.

An opinion had been sought from the state's attorney general, and that splendid officer concluded on the side of what his Opinion Committee called *obvious logic*, a strange phrase in the law, by the way. The Opinion Committee further determined that the Homicide Squad (five men, five desks, etc.) was responsible to the two county entities by virtue (another strange word in the law) of a shared budget responsibility.

And that, too, was that.

Joe Molden and Peter Hauer rounded out the five-man unit; both had transferred from Grand Theft-Larceny to the Homicide Squad in April of that year.

Hauer was called Young Mr. Hauer by Sam Dorson, for reasons best known to Dorson, and if there was resentment on the part of Hauer, he didn't show it. At least not in public.

Joe Molden, also in his early thirties, believed he had a strike against him from the very start: he was Sheriff Parkinson's nephew, and despite assurances by Donovan of impartiality and fairness, Molden usually felt insecure and unwanted.

Buenrostro and Dorson thought Molden had no reason to feel that way, but there it was.

The Squad managed to solve the relatively few county cases handled in the course of every fiscal year; the secret to much of this was plain, plodding work. And, county murders were fewer and not as frequent when compared to the murders committed within the jurisdiction of each of the Valley's small towns and cities. The second ingredient that led to the solving of cases was dedication to detail, to the job at hand and to the amassing of hard facts which would then be translated into evidence. Nothing fancy about it.

The Squad had most recently worked on a murder on one of the nearby farms. It was a case of incest, murder and suicide. All five members of Homicide had agreed that the case "had been a bitch," but as usual in this type of case, the newspapers were not told of the incest.

The reporters, who had not been allowed in the room, who had not seen the room—a usual procedure of Donovan's—wrote several pages on the blood-filled room, the bodies, of an unknown intruder, of strange writings on the walls (there were none) and on the ghastly scene of the double murder. That last part was correct.

It had been a double murder, and it had been a sad one, too: a seventeen-year-old had shot his fourteen-year-old sister and himself on a bright Easter Sunday afternoon in their parents' bedroom.

The murder earlier that October morning had happened exactly five hundred feet outside the Klail City city limits, and the distance made it a county crime.

And, where the crime had been committed was an interesting piece of business, too: the site was a gaudily painted, cheaply built, two-story apartment building constructed out of hollow cement blocks, which the absentee owner proudly called Rio Largo: A Complex for Young Marrieds. The first floor was known as Rio Largo I and the second as Rio Largo

II. There had been plans for Rio Largo III and IV and for V and VI, too, as well as plans for an outdoor theater, maid service and resident plumbers and electricians; all of this was still on the drawing boards and in someone's imagination other than that of the owner who had gone on to bigger and better things. As it were.

The five-hundred-foot location was no accident. The two to three hundred souls who lived there did not vote in city elections, did not, then, pay city taxes, but then neither did the forward-thinking developer of Rio Largo I and II.

The Young Marrieds did have a minor inconvenience: since R.L. I and II were outside the city limits, the Klail City Fire Department could not be called upon for assistance. No, this wasn't exactly true. The F.D *could* be called upon, but would not respond, such calls being outside of its jurisdiction.

Most of the tenants held low- to mid-level jobs in various Valley and Klail City businesses and accepted the shoddy plumbing, wiring and construction uncomplainingly. But then, they were just as quick to move out as they were to move in. A halfway house, then.

Rafe Buenrostro continued his typing amid fitful stops and starts as he fiddled with the ribbon which would jump out of its holding bar from time to time. A stupid murder, he muttered, for the third or fourth time, as he attempted to bring a sense of order to a senseless occurrence.

It had begun as one of those harmless domestic disputes, so called. Husband I had a girlfriend who also had a husband. Husband I also had a wife, of course, and it was she who accosted the girlfriend, before two witnesses, in the laundry room of the apartment building. A regular punch-up.

Husband II was bringing in some additional laundry for his loving wife when he saw her being pummeled by Wife I. Husband II separated them and upon learning the reasons for the

fracas, flattened his straying spouse, ran to their room, grabbed a gun and went on the hunt.

Result: The building superintendent, in no way connected, was splattered by three slugs from a nasty-looking .38 S & W Master.

The super had been repairing a bathroom leak in Husband I's apartment and was walking out of the apartment when Husband II unloaded on him. A case of mistaken identity: Husband I, thirtyish and six feet tall; the super, in his fifties, stood five feet four inches tall.

Idiots.

Husband I, at poolside, heard the screaming and yelling, and ran for the laundry room. When he heard the shots, however, he sprinted across the parking lot, jumped in his VW, drove the twenty miles to Jonesville at top speed, parked the car in a shopping mall lot, ran across the International Bridge of Amity (El puente internacional de la amistad) to Barrones, Tamaulipas.

Damned fool.

Within a few minutes of the shooting, the two women made up on the spot; they also had a good cry, and then Wife I drove her newly found friend to Small's Medical Clinic where they swore to stand by their mates.

The bonds of friendship.

Husband II, in the meantime, had called an attorney in Klail City who promptly advised his client to turn himself in to the arresting officer. He, the attorney, would then meet his client at Judge Hearn's court.

Rafe Buenrostro had taken the telephone call from an excited neighbor who proceeded to report three, possibly four, murders at Rio Largo II.

County Patrolman Rudi Schranz accompanied Lt. Buenrostro who instructed Schranz to arrest Husband II (Andrew Billings) on suspicion of murder and to present him before

Municipal Court Judge Robert E. Lee Hearn for arraignment and hearing.

The photographer and the lab personnel arrived within minutes of Buenrostro; thirty-six photographs were taken for evidentiary proof and the various rooms were then powdered for prints.

Husband II handed the gun to Lt. Buenrostro who then tagged it and placed it in a plastic bag.

The victim, too, was identified and tagged and then driven to River Delta Mortuary, Inc., as per contract with the Belken County Commissioners Court. The owner of the mortuary was a brother-in-law to the county judge and this, too, was no accident.

A search of the victim's room revealed three open cartons of cigarettes: Camels, Pall Malls and some filter-tipped Delicados. Buenrostro found two picture albums of old-time movie stars: Banky, Bara, Bow, Naldi, Negri, Swanson, etc. . . . A grocery bag stuffed in the bottom of a laundry hamper revealed a small Kodak camera and thirteen envelopes containing two hundred and thirty-five prints of youngsters ranging from six to fourteen years of age; the youngsters were naked and stared rather gloomily at the camera.

There were other personal effects in the superintendent's room: two pairs of brown shoes, two pairs of khaki pants, two blue chambray shirts, one dress shirt, five pairs of socks, an Army web belt, two new and unused nylon shorts in plastic bags, as well as two grimy jockey straps draped over the shower rod. Buenrostro found some assorted toilet articles in shoeboxes which contained two boxes of unused Sheik condoms and a plastic wallet. The identity card was made out to J. Thos. West; this proved to be the name of the superintendent as identified by the name plate on his bloody khaki shirt.

The wallet was empty save for some more pictures of young children similar to those found in the hamper.

The two laundry room witnesses and four other apartment residents were cooperative, although none “actually saw the shooting, sir,” but all of whom “heard the shots, yessir.”

How many shots?

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Names of Husbands I and II and their wives?

Phillips, I think. Brown; no, not Brown. Something like that, though. Can’t recall just now. Don’t know.

Typical.

A thorough search of the apartment cleared this up, of course.

Rafe Buenrostro telephoned the Mexican counterpart across the Rio Grande. Within twenty minutes, Captain Lisandro Gómez Solís reported that one Perry Pylant had been picked up at Alfonso Fong’s China Doll Club rather “drunk and somewhat disruptive of the public order.” (The last phrase covered everything from arson to spitting on the brick sidewalks.)

Señor Pylant, said Gómez Solís, was then escorted to the Jonesville side, warned not to recross the bridge and held there until he was picked up by the Jonesville police who, in turn, had already called the Belken County Patrol; Perry Pylant was held as a material witness and his car impounded for storage by Lone Star Salvage & Garage.

Patrolman Schranz drove to Jonesville, took a preliminary statement and drove the witness to the Klail City Court House. A second statement was then taken; since no charges were filed, the witness Pylant was released.

What arrangements he made to take his car out of storage were up to Mr. Pylant.

Husband II, Andrew Billings, had his bond set at \$25,000 by Judge Hearn; Billings’ attorney was accompanied by a friend who made bond. And so, Billings’ attorney and both wives drove back together to Rio Largo II after the arraignment.

Assholes.