

CALIFORNIA GIRL

Tara Raines

**INDIGENOUS:
GROWING UP CALIFORNIAN**

Cris Mazza

City Lights Publishers
<http://www.citylights.com>
318 pages; paper, \$16.95

Indigenous. It is a frightening and lovely word. It acts as a cradle and a jail cell. We are, all of us, indigenous. Some of us may not feel like it. Some of us were military brats, as the vernacular calls it. Some of us left our birth lands before we were old enough to walk. Yet even those of us who have never settled down or laid down roots long enough to feel at home in a particular landscape are indigenous. We are indigenous to our families, who shape our idea of home long after we have left it, and we are indigenous to our bodies, which may shift and grow with us but never leave us. We are indigenous to our *selves*, which embody all these things. Homeland. Family. Body. Cris Mazza's memoir explores all of these things.

Most poignantly, perhaps, Mazza unravels the stereotypes of her homeland. As an early émigré to California myself, I still remember how different was the California I encountered than the California I had imagined. California both suffers and benefits from its glamorous allure. People who have never been to California, and even some who I think have (tourists who limit their exploration of California to its Southern California beaches), imagine California to be one long stretch of beach with a few delicately placed palm trees, fronds gently swaying under the influence of a (perhaps?) tropical breeze.

California is, of course, more and less than this, and Mazza gracefully casts aside impersonal outsider notions of what California seems to be and recreates a California that is personal. Her California is a homeland. A homeland that was not only a backdrop to a youth and young adulthood spent there, but also an active participant in her growth, both physical and

emotional. As Mazza discovers what it is to be Californian, she also discovers what it is to be herself.

Mazza describes California as a "place where the real value is a little harder to see" because superficial notions of what California is mask the "real" California. It is perhaps the special right of those indigenous to a place to uncover the "real" essence of the place; they are the experts by default, but it is often, instead, the outsider who feels more free to make sweeping statements about a place, and it is these simplifications that then get accepted as fact and, in California's case, get translated into nearly mythological status. Perhaps this is because the indigenous are unable to allow themselves to fall into the trap of sweeping generalizations. Their understanding of the situation is far more delicate and complicated.

"For those of us who didn't have to *become* but *are*, understanding the state is not a task of expressing enough aggrandizement, but of locating the words at all, a delicate endeavor to extract the state *we* know from the romance and hoopla." We are, of course, still talking about the state of California, but it can be read as the state of other things as well. In learning to know ourselves, don't we also have to extract the selves we know from all the hoopla? We are, each of us, a mess of tangled contradictions, and somewhere along the line some feature of ourselves gets exaggerated and misrepresented, and it is these features that become the stereotypical features of ourselves. Sunny. Warm 70 degrees all year round. Woman. Californian. Writer. It is in the process of growing up that we disentangle ourselves from these stereotypes, which are weedy distractions that try valiantly to trip our still-growing limbs as we walk awkwardly toward adulthood. Mazza, too, encounters these distractions, and, in coming to grips with her own status as an indigenous California, she manages to disentangle herself from them.

Of course, these are more than simply distractions. Each facet of ourselves that dares to entrench itself into stereotype shows us something about ourselves we did not know before. Each time we become entangled in a new version of ourselves, we learn more about ourselves. Among Mazza's various manifesta-

tions: a pioneer trombonist, “one of the boys,” a surrogate girlfriend, a dog trainer, a writer, the would-be lover of an innocent camp-going girl, a musician’s wife, a frigid woman, an erotic woman, an academic, a Californian, a daughter.

*Poignantly, Mazza unravels
the stereotypes of her homeland.*

We all have within us a multiplicity of former selves. Some stay with us, some are discarded, and some are reinvented. In some periods of our lives, certain selves step forward to the podium, declare themselves to be us, and speak for us for a time. It is perhaps the moments when these selves lose hold and reveal themselves to be not essentially us but merely transitional versions, that we really feel who it is we are. It is then that we can turn to a husband who may not be a husband much longer, in a foreign, snowy terrain that is not our homeland, and declare ourselves with perfect certainty, having glimpsed for an instant who we are: “‘Know what?’ Eyes down to my own rumpled lap, the cotton gauze skirt material as usual fuzzed by dog hair, then back up to meet his, dismal and heavy. ‘We don’t belong here,’ I said. And his bloodless, winter-dry lips actually smiled.” So that who we are emerges not as any definitive version, but as a progression of disentangling. We are not held to any one version of ourselves but can be all of them at once or none of them. We disentangle ourselves from our own imaginings of who we thought we were, and, in realizing that we do not “belong” in that particular entanglement, come a little bit closer to discovering who we are.

In the final essay in this volume, Mazza talks about her relationship with her mother at a time in both their lives in which they feel some version of self-doubt. She says, speaking of her mother and herself, “Would she be able to process any narration of this solemn solitude when

I could barely find the language to describe it?... Wasn’t she living her own version? I imagined her in a dismal, chilly Southern California winter,” but “[i]n truth neither of us was in a dark winter. I was in a gentle Alabama where the daffodils came up at the end of February, and she in California where my father’s strawberries began to ripen in early March.” It is this emergence from out of the snowy climes of uncertainty into a summery, sunny land of understanding that finally tells us who we are. It is California itself that acts as symbol of this sunny land in Mazza’s memoir. It represents the parts of herself that have been misunderstood along the way and the parts that are essential to who she is. Just as it is with California, and the outsiders who view it, it is not that we settle on a particular version or realize with a sudden epiphany of who we are (or what California is), but more that we realize that we are free, for an instant, to be who we are without being constrained by where we are from or who we have been. And we are free to encounter California without the encumbrances of our preconceived ideas about it.

California is a state, but it is also an idea. It is a state that, through no fault of its own, lends itself toward misconceptions about it. In this way, California is like ourselves, fumbling our way toward adulthood. In youth, we are too ready, perhaps, to let what others believe of us become the truth of what we are. Later we recognize that we are more than what is said about us. We are not simply a land of sun and beaches. We have mountains and deserts, too. We are not simply a land of sun and beaches. We have seasons. We stumble out of winter with new understanding. In not letting California be a simple sum of the stereotypes that have come to represent it, Mazza also frees herself. She is indigenous, but not merely indigenous. She is herself.

Tara Raines lives in San Diego.