

# Bloodbrothers

By Richard Price.

271 pp. Boston:

Houghton Mifflin Company.

\$8.95.

---

By RICHARD ELMAN

---

"Bloodbrothers," Richard Price's second novel, is a book with a thesis: family loyalty is the ultimate treason to oneself.

Like some proletarian fictions of a few decades back, this story of Stony De Coco, 18, and his clan grinds and blusters from point to point, undeterred by Price's feeling for life or his dramatic gifts. As Stony chooses between the family racket (which is a corrupt layabout electricians' local) and realizing his own possibilities in the world of strangers beyond the confines of Co-op City, the Bronx, incidents from the psychopathic behavior of the De Cocos, their wives, friends and other wounded kinfolk, proliferate as illustrations of a subtext about the mutual destructiveness of those who still comply to the hoary doctrine that blood is thicker than water; however, the author never allows his substantial powers of observation and empathy to keep in focus, or perhaps animate this. When all else fails Price's rather distant and contemptuous estimation of what such unpleasant, chagrined, consuming, stupefied proles are about, he introduces a psychiatrist to sermonize to Stony. Or a best friend, who owns a hosiery shop, is made to deliver a summary that recalls what one might hear in Manhattan, perhaps, in therapy.

---

Richard Elman is adjunct professor of writing at the Columbia University School of the Arts.

This sort of coercion of characters to do their author's dirty work is always a saddening, disappointing process. It's a sin against talent, and art, the eye, the ear, the emotions. In "Bloodbrothers" Price has closed his eyes and stopped up his ears and composed page after page of hostile, insult-laden dialogue interspersed with a hyped-up colloquial narrative through which the reader is bullied to sustain the illusion that the story has been composed by somebody with a background similar to that of the participants.

But, of course, this is just another literary device: within this work the author's total knowledge of what is happening to people is constantly pitted against the blindness of his characters, and the result is almost as brutalizing to us and Price, it would seem, as what we are told has been happening to Stony and his aunt and uncle, father, mother, kid brother and girlfriends.

In other words, the very best moments of the book never manage to adhere to its plot: A proud breadwinner taking his family on a Sunday excursion to see his latest acquisition in the country, a cemetery plot; or two sisters-in-law over coffee lamenting their marital conditions. When one confides to the other that her husband made love to her five times during the past week, the reply comes flat out: "You braggin' or complainin'?"

Most of the time Price isn't content to understate, to let things happen, or even take a chance that the situation of these people is even more ugly or desperate than he knows. If his characters won't cooperate in being utterly unredeemable, he twists their arms or stomps on them a bit. Stony sometimes sounds like a Lenny Bruce monologue and sometimes like an angry analysand; and I began to wonder if all the malice in the book could be attributed to the characters. Or was it not the work of imperfect patience and compassion on the part of the author?

Compassion doesn't mean liking; that was not a serious flaw in Price's much celebrated first novel, "The Wanderers," which depicted a similar milieu. But it's no help at all to a writer if he feels superior to his characters; Gorky knew that, as do our contemporaries, Sorrentino and Selby. But this sort of stuff is more like a dirty-mouthed Italianate Hyman Kaplan: a few touches aspiring to art, and much of the rest simply kibitzing or commentary. ■