



CULTURE

Bronx Story

A conversation with Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, whose new book, *Random Family*, chronicles the struggles of an impoverished extended family in New York

APRIL 2003 ISSUE

SHARE ▾

In 1990, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, then an editor at *Seventeen* and a freelance reporter seeking out stories about young people, attended the trial of a twenty-two year-old drug dealer named Boy George, an entrepreneurial prodigy who had built an empire around his own brand of heroin, *Obsession*. As she began writing about him, Boy George introduced LeBlanc to his tight-knit social network of friends and family, centered in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the South Bronx. This network included Jessica, one of George's girlfriends, who had been angling for years to become his primary, even if not legal, "wife"; Jessica's tough younger brother, Cesar; and Cesar's favorite girlfriend, Coco. George went to prison for life as a result of the trial, but over the course of the next eleven years LeBlanc followed Jessica, Cesar, Coco, and their expanding families through the course of their daily lives. Within a few years, Jessica and Cesar also ended up sentenced to long prison terms (Jessica for her minor role in George's business and Cesar for a series of charges, including the accidental fatal shooting of his best friend), while Coco remained, struggling, on the outside with her family. LeBlanc became a frequent and comfortable presence in the lives of Coco and her children as



Random
Family

Random Family

by Adrian

Nicole LeBlanc

Scribner

416 pages, \$25

they moved from shelters to the apartments of friends and family and, eventually, to the depressed upstate city of Troy, New York, searching for a new start.

These experiences form the narrative of LeBlanc's first book, *Random Family*, which traces the lives of her subjects from the mid-eighties until close to the present day. In the book's first chapter, George and Jessica meet, and George's heroin-derived wealth fuels limousine rides, lavish parties, and one magical ski weekend in the Poconos for himself, Jessica, Cesar, and Coco—as well as more ordinary luxuries like full kitchen cupboards for Jessica's mother. After George's assets evaporate, the book's subjects resume fighting for survival in a world of such economic fragility that a mistake, an impulsive splurge, or even a generous gesture toward someone more desperate can send a family into a state of emergency. LeBlanc chronicles these ups and downs matter-of-factly, from the point of view of a narrator rather than a player in the drama, letting the stark facts speak for themselves.

LeBlanc's research into these realities was extensive. She was present for prison visits, welfare appointments, and parent-teacher conferences. She attended a master's program in law at Yale in order to understand her subjects' trials and sentencing, and a training session for counselors at Camp Ramapo to understand the way that Coco's children were spending their summers. In Troy, she writes about Coco throwing a boyfriend out of the house for dealing drugs, and about Coco's disabled daughter, Pearl, getting kicked out of the Head Start program she loved when other family problems caused her attendance to falter. She recounts philosophical discussions with Cesar as he begins, in prison, to take an interest in the history and politics that have shaped his life, and she watches as Coco's oldest daughter, Mercedes, begins to gain confidence through a supportive relationship with her Big Sister, a volunteer mentor. She even sees the extended family start a new generation when Jessica's oldest daughter turns sixteen and, not too long after her birthday party, gives birth to her first child.

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and many other journals. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from Smith College, a Master's of

Philosophy and Modern Literature from Oxford, and a Master's of Law Studies from Yale. We spoke recently in Leominster, Massachusetts, where she grew up.

—*Sarah Cohen*

Adrian LeBlanc **How did you begin writing this book?**

Adrian LeBlanc

When I was at Smith College I worked as an intern for Richard Todd, who was then an editor of *New England Monthly*. I worked on a piece about Leominster, which he published, and he sort of mentored me. After I came back from graduate school and was working at *Seventeen*, Dick would occasionally drop me a note encouraging me to think about a book. I had, by then, written a couple of pieces for *The Village Voice* about Boy George and related subjects, and I sent him those clips. We worked on a proposal that really was about George and his business; a book about a young man and the management of a business empire. But as I began reporting, my interest just kept coming back to the women. And so Dick—he's a good editor—told me to follow my heart and let my interests lead me.

RECOMMENDED READING

Dante Alighieri: Epic Poet, Ass Kicker

BENJAMIN POPPER

A Brief Guide to Dead Scholarship

When Autism Stars

ALYSSA ROSENBERG

When did you start to realize how much time it was going to take to complete the research?

I don't think I ever did. I do remember thinking, *Not yet, not yet*. Whenever I asked myself, *Are you ready to write this up?* I always felt that I was at the beginning of my understanding. To be honest, I'm not sure that it required the length of time I spent, but, in part because of that extra time, the story ended up becoming an intergenerational story. I do think it's a better book for the additional time, because the writer who would have written it in 1995 or 1996 would have been a much more sentimental, naively liberal person. During the time I was reporting I became older and more experienced, and that infused a certain detachment that I don't think I was capable of earlier on.

What do you think replaced the sentimentality?

I think what replaced it was the enormity of the material. Because it's such a dizzying story, with so many strands, the only way through it was to keep it simple, to sift it down to detail, to tell it clearly and on the micro level. When I would veer up from that level and try to speak more generally, I would think, *Who the heck could comment on this? How could you possibly say something about this?*

To me, the book read like a novel, and I found myself relating to the people very much the way I relate to characters in fiction. So I was wondering whether you sometimes write fiction, and whether you were influenced by any particular novels.

I don't write fiction, and I've never had any interest in writing fiction, but I definitely do think that certain novelists influenced me. My impulse is to say Nelson Algren. I remember reading his novels and being able to hear the voices. I also remember James Baldwin—I took a fiction-writing class with him, and I really admired the honesty of his novels.

How did you come to the decision to narrate the story in the third person, and not to make yourself a character in the book? Did you know from the beginning that you would take that approach?

I definitely had opinions about that. I always feel frustrated when a journalist enters into her story. It makes me think, *You better make this good, because you're taking me away from the thing that I really want to know about.* There have also been plenty of stories about white girls going to the ghetto. There's nothing wrong with that, but it has been done. At the same time, I think I'm all over the book. I imbue the story with the things I care about.

Some reviewers seem to have been almost shocked by some of the unpleasant realities of your subjects' lives. How do those kinds of reactions strike you?

Initially it made me quite protective, because the people in the book were sometimes written about in a way that was condemning and incredibly judgmental. It's hard for me to understand how poverty can be invisible to so many people, since I see it everywhere. Readers sometimes think this world is so different; on the one hand, they feel connected to the people I'm writing about, and on the other hand they're saying their lives are a world away. It's true that the circumstances of these people's lives are very harrowing, but the love, the loss, the chaos, the betrayals—all these are also human things.

There's a fair amount of press that says that there's something unusual about this book—that I got some kind of special deep access—but I think it's the oldest story on earth. It's not like I penetrated the Watergate or something—I spent time with people in their homes, doing ordinary things.

You mentioned people writing about *Random Family* in a way that is personally judgmental of the book's subjects. How do you respond to those kinds of judgments?

I think that kind of judgment is a defense mechanism and a distancing mechanism. If Coco's poverty is her fault, then your lack of it is your accomplishment, right? It's a

very unsophisticated way of saying that everyone got what they deserved at either end of the rainbow, which I think is a complete crock of shit. I think you end up on the lucky side or you don't. For instance, I didn't have space to talk about this in the book, but Coco's sister Iris and her husband worked hard all the time. They were the poster family for everything you're supposed to do, but they were never substantially ahead of anyone else. In fact, they got penalized every time things started going better. Whenever Iris's husband got a raise at work, the city would automatically increase their rent, so there was never a period of time when they could get a leg up. It became in some ways counterproductive to aim higher. I ask myself why a guy like that can't have a grace period when the rent stays the same, so that he can leave the projects. He always wanted to buy a home. It would be logical; it would energize members of a community that's depressed. But it never happens. Politically, I also think that judgment can be a very astute strategy for severing us from the most important question, which is whether we should help people in need. It shouldn't be a matter of who deserves help or not, but of whether we want to be a country that allows its neediest to continue to need. Condemnation of individuals and their choices mutes all these other really important logistical questions about funding and budget and politics.

Have you been called upon to weigh in as an expert on poverty, or an advocate, since the book has come out?

I've been asked in the wake of this to speak at a lot of non-profits, and to participate in some panel discussions on policy questions. But I think it's a dangerous invitation for a journalist.

You mean for a journalist to be recommending policy?

I think I could be useful as an information source; I just think that my being an advocate is somewhat questionable. I could be a fundraiser for good programs, but advocacy doesn't hold my attention the way that journalism does. If I compare the options of doing a story versus, say, preparing to give a speech in front of a foundation, my excitement levels are wildly different. I am curious about the mechanisms of those worlds—about legal culture and the culture of social policy—so

it could be an interesting education. But I would have to go in as a journalist, not as a speaker.

In reading the book, I was struck by how much the social programs seemed to help, especially the children. Do you agree with that observation?

That is one thing that I would like to say again and again. It's less a program's quality—even the most mediocre programs did some good. The problem was that nothing lasted long enough. The interruptions of the programs, the lack of continuity, and the fact that none of the programs hooked up with each other made them less effective. Basic logistical considerations, like phones and public transportation, were also real obstacles. Something happens in the culture of social policy where people get all lofty, and their brains get really big, and they stop asking, "How is she going to *get* to summer camp?"

It was encouraging to read that programs were usually so well-received because I've encountered so much cynicism about those kinds of social services.

Nobody's criticizing the providers. I'm not saying that Coco, her siblings, and her relatives might not make a crack every once in a while about an earnest social worker, but they were asking for help, and welcoming help. The only time they rejected it on an emotional level was when the help came in a form that was judgmental and punitive—some person coming into their house and acting like a know-it-all, which was very rare. Also, sometimes the structure of programming would force people to choose between two unrelated programs, because they wouldn't be allowed to keep both.

Do you feel any concern about the idea of government intervention in people's lives? Is there a danger of paternalism, or a threat to people's freedom and self-respect?

Social programming has been starved of financial support, and the vast majority of it is now on a crisis-intervention basis, so I think that that question is almost a luxury. It's a question from another time. My gut feeling is that it's also a concern of people

who have not needed help. People are quite capable of determining the extent to which they receive and reject the impulses behind the help they need. But I do think that programs can sometimes create new problems. For example, when programs are constantly interrupted, then the fifth program down the line not only has the task at hand, it also has the task of convincing the players that it's there to stay, and, of course, it's probably not. Another interesting thing is the way that poor people, especially kids, are often very responsive to the most cut-and-dried personalities. There's a real responsiveness to very structured things. I can see why the military is so helpful to a lot of people, and even why a lot of poor people respond to the Jehovah's Witnesses—incredible structure. So in a weird way maybe the most conventional kind of paternalism would be better than something more ambiguous.

Something I saw at Camp Ramapo that I thought was really revealing is that when there were college students as counselors who were totally untutored in social politics, who were just responding in a direct, human way, it was hugely successful. They didn't carry emotional baggage; they really didn't make judgments, because I don't think that the campers' backgrounds were what they were thinking about. Human connections totally trump all the other stuff, but you have to give them a week or two to develop. If those counselors had worked in welfare offices instead of at camp, it would have been hard for them to develop the same kinds of relationships.

What are the problems that make it hard to develop those kinds of relationships in welfare offices?

Time alone can be a huge problem. When you go to a 2:00 appointment and you're not seen until 6:00, it makes it hard to develop a trusting connection—and it makes you feel that your time isn't valuable.

Is it really like that?

The waits are unbelievable. I can count on one hand the times that we were seen within two hours of a scheduled appointment. Then, of course, the day you say, "The appointment's at 2:00, let's go at 4:00," that's the day they call you at quarter of 4:00 and you get yelled at.

Were the delays because the people working in welfare offices were too busy?

Their caseloads are impossible—as many as two hundred and fifty cases at a time for one caseworker. Also, there's something that happens in those jobs—I don't know what it is, but people get burned out. In the places where things were better run, though, the mood was noticeably different. For instance, there was one health clinic in the South Bronx that was really jazzed up, and when you went there you could feel the energy in the room. Everything was different. People were committed. People cared.

Did that make the service more effective?

Absolutely. The doctors had time for the patients, and they understood that one of the key areas of their utility was the amount of time they could spend. Often the doctor would be a resource for other questions. People could ask family court questions and things like that. A lot is accomplished by those few relationships that are good. That's why I think it's so important to connect services: if Mercedes's Big Sister is effective, then Coco might turn to her to ask for help with school or other needs. Those people should be supported in ways that help make them connections to a larger network. Theoretically, your job-transition agency should provide all kinds of information about what happens when you get a job, what happens to Medicaid, to all those things. The caseworkers really have to care, and to see their jobs as being helpful in broadly defined ways. A lot of times, though, the people who work in those jobs are only one step away from poverty themselves, so there's a class drama that plays out. In drug treatment, a lot of people who go through treatment then become counselors, which is good because they know the game, so they're sharp. But in social services it doesn't quite work. It's far better when people are coming from totally different experiences. For people from these poor communities, the cost of making it requires a kind of distancing that's really complicated. A college student at Camp Ramapo, on the other hand, wouldn't be lording her success around, or blaming children for their situation.

Given all of these problems, and the fact that so many social services are currently getting cut, I was wondering what you think funding priorities should be—where

are resources most needed?

Day care and youth programs are essential. And certainly public education—it's the last institution standing. You don't have to research very long and hard to find out that youth programming is a successful way to spend money, or to understand that prison funding is taking money away from education. It's a clear equation that's having debilitating consequences. The prison/public education funding situation has to be, and will be, readdressed, because the budget just can't hold it anymore.

What is creating the need for increases in prison spending? Is it higher rates of incarceration?

From the archives:

"The Prison-Industrial Complex" (December 1998)

Correctional officials see danger in prison overcrowding. Others see opportunity. The nearly two million Americans behind bars—the majority of them nonviolent offenders—mean jobs for depressed regions and windfalls for profiteers. By Eric Schlosser

There's been a historical drive toward prison building, largely financed by Republican Administrations, to give jobs to depressed Republican districts. Most, if not all, of the new prisons in New York State are in Republican districts, and they hire the constituents of those districts. In California it's been shown that money being spent on prisons is being taken directly out of the education budget. And once the prisons are built, they have to put people in them. It's insidious. Even for kids, programs don't kick in until you get in trouble. Mercedes had been identified as a child in need of attention from the minute she was in preschool, but she was on the waiting list for a Big Sister for almost two and a half years. She only got her Big Sister at age eleven because she finally ended up on probation. Why would you want to give Mercedes access to the available resources only if she gets in trouble, as opposed to providing supports to prevent that from happening? What kind of society would think like that?

In the book several characters really seem to mature and come into their own in prison. Is that because prisons were successfully providing opportunities for rehabilitation?

That observation worried me a great deal, because it made me wonder what that says about the nature of opportunity. The epigraph of the book, which was very important to me, has to do with this. Cesar has moments of rehabilitation in prison, but what about all the moments he missed up until that point? I think the rehabilitation that occurred for some of these people in prison actually had next to nothing to do with the prisons themselves. Prisons have been utterly stripped of programs. What actually helps is the relief of family responsibility. But for the parents in the outside world, that responsibility is heavier than ever.

The book doesn't touch very much on the effects of the major welfare reform in 1996, and its strict work requirements, but I'm curious about your opinion. What do you see as its consequences?

I worry about the inherited burden of parenting that falls on the eldest children in a family, because of the lack of day care and the long working hours for mothers. That seems incredibly serious to me, because all of the women in these families have been trying to move that burden off of their children. They all complain of having had to raise their own siblings from an early age. Now Coco has to work long hours, and the hours her children spend at home unsupervised, in a dangerous neighborhood, are risky for them. If she could earn a better minimum wage then she could move to a safer community, or if day care and youth programs were available then her kids could be out of harm's way while she's at work, but neither of these options is available. Another thing that I worry about is the strain caused by the disruption of a supportive community network; not only are the oldest children taking care of things, but the strongest members of the community—the ones who can work—are absent most of the time. Coco enjoys working, but I worry about her health. It's one thing to work sixteen hours a day when you're twenty-eight, and another thing when you're forty-eight, or in your fifties or sixties. Late-life medical problems tend to happen to the poor during midlife.

We've had so many major national events in the past couple of years. How important have they been to Coco and the other people you wrote about?

I know that a lot of people watched 9/11, but I think it's fair to say that there's a sense of the mainstream media world being at a far remove. Those moments could feel like a hundred million miles away. What strikes me is the regularity with which they suffered traumatic loss, and their continual compassion for other people. I was very struck by that. Coco had real sympathy for her landlord, who went through a divorce. Coco was incredibly empathic, and I just remember thinking, *She needs to fix your toilet*. There was a sense that politics was far away, though. Early on there were elections—Dinkins was running—and I remember that somebody came through the neighborhood blasting a Dinkins announcement, and it felt like it was from another planet.

Does anyone vote?

The people I was hanging around with weren't mobilized in that way. There were certainly people in the neighborhood who did, but not the ones I was spending time with. But I did feel the active presence of religious organizations in those neighborhoods.

They were far more organized than any other kind of programs. I would read about all these government or private programs that were supposedly in the Bronx, but there wasn't a trace of them in the neighborhood I was in, ever, at any time. But religious groups—mainly small churches—regularly went door to door, actively doing grassroots organizing. Their presence was definitely felt in those neighborhoods.

Do you think that, as President Bush has argued, there's something inherently more effective about church-based organizing?

I don't think it's inherently more effective. I just think they were willing to do the legwork that is required to enlist the active involvement of people who have been alienated. It doesn't happen by hoping that someone is going to pick up a pamphlet at the clinic. It happens by knocking on doors and making your presence known and

providing information that is useful, or activities that are useful. Even then I'm not saying there was a real engagement. Coco never really got involved or felt a connection. But at least they were there.

I've been wondering what your time in the field was like. How did you make sure to get the right anecdotes?

A big part of reporting is just being present. You have to show up ten days in a row to get the one telling detail. I would often say to people, *That paragraph? A year and a half.* You have to keep yourself buoyant. It's work. And thank God if you're interested in what you're writing about, but on some level it's dog work. My boyfriend always tells me to remember those nights when the phone rang at two or three and I was exhausted. He would say to me, "You don't have to go." And I would get up and say, "I've got to go." I would like to say that I was always on a mission and passionate, but there were moments when I felt that I just had to go because I had to be there.

What kinds of things were the calls about?

Someone having a baby, or someone ending up in the hospital, or someone getting arrested, or somebody getting an eviction

Would they call you because they would think it was something that you should report on, or because they wanted you to be there helping?

There were a multiplicity of motivations. I was a main person in Coco's life, so if something was happening to her she'd think, *Call Adrian.* I was just on the phone list. Good and bad things—I remember when Coco went into labor with her daughter Nautica. Her sister called and said, "She's ready," and I just sped up to the Bronx. I think I also reminded people of the seriousness of those moments—not the births, which everyone enjoyed, but the deaths and the arrests—because the trauma can be numbing. I was always so much on high alert that I helped people to jumpstart emotions that had long been buried. When we would go to prisons, for instance, I would be completely overwhelmed—whereas they had become pretty blasé. But by the twentieth time I was used to it, too.

So did you track your changing responses?

I did. I kept a journal of my emotional responses. Thank God, because when I look back — That's what I mean about the book I would have written in '95—it would have been much more based on my emotions. I remember when Cesar, very early on, in one of my first visits with him, was telling Coco about how he ran into his father in prison. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't even find words for what I felt. But by the time I sat down to write the book I had met so many young people who had been reunited with siblings in prison, who ran into their mother, whose aunt was in—that I understood how Cesar could have told Coco about it as calmly as he did. Not that he wasn't excited, but he wasn't as surprised as I would have expected. Had I written the book two years into the reporting, that detail probably would have formed a whole chapter.

The book talks about what seems like a constant onslaught of things that each could be life-defining events.

Yes, and you can't be in an active state of despair for long periods and still function. You go in and out of it. But if six tragedies happen one on top of the other, something like a sudden outburst with a caseworker is more understandable. Suddenly it all bottlenecks to one moment. If you're sitting there reporting at the welfare office and a woman explodes at a caseworker it still comes as a surprise. But I always say that it's like a balloon: if you squeeze one part of the balloon, the other part is stretched, and if you keep squeezing it, it's just going to pop.

When you think of it that way, it seems amazing that Coco is still holding it together.

Yeah, but how long can she go on? She dances. She goes dancing, and that is her gym, or her herbal tea—that's how she gets out her frustrations.

That's interesting, because dancing seems like something that someone who's inclined to judge would be quick to condemn.

She takes a bottle of water. She doesn't drink at all. She goes dancing and just exhausts herself. I remember at the beginning thinking, *You're going dancing? You have three kids. You're going dancing?* But now I think, *Go dancing*. It's a healthy thing.

Your subjects' lives seem to be affected by some pretty rigid cultural ideas about gender. I'm curious about your take on the gender roles and the relationships between men and women.

One of the things I'm really interested in writing about now is the evolution of male identity in different poor urban environments. That's a question that evolved out of my coming to terms with the fascinating mix of subservience and strength of the women in this book. The women are both far more circumscribed than many of the women I know from other parts of my life and, at the same time, far stronger. So I'm really interested in how that plays off of male identity. Many of the women, when they found out that I had a boyfriend, would ask how he would let me go out so much of the time alone. Also, I had very practical problems. For instance, when I would call a man, his current girlfriend many times wouldn't deliver the message. There was incredible competitiveness. I would say, "No, I'm a journalist, and I just want to talk to him," but the idea of a woman who wanted to spend time alone with a boy in a purely professional capacity provoked a lot of suspicion. I had a car at one point—my brother gave me this old beater of a car—and a lot of the young girls were amazed that I had a car and could drive. Many of the boys got their licenses and drove but a lot of the women didn't. Those same women would be taking care of whole households of people. Coco was an incredible, strong force, and yet she didn't like to go anywhere alone. Sometimes when I would leave late at night Coco or her mother, Foxy, would ask if I would be okay on the ten-minute train ride home. I would try to explain that I loved being alone, and they would look at me almost with pity.

Is the book going to end up on film?

Not definitely; there's a lot of interest, but nothing's been finalized. Even if somebody options it, it could take years.

It seems like a filmmaker working on this book would have to make a lot of choices—would the movie be more grim, or more joyful?

I think that the interesting thing would be a movie, or a series, that could somehow allow for the range of characters. If it were a movie it would have to focus on a couple of people, whereas if it were an ongoing thing it could be more of a family story.

So a TV series is on the table too?

It is. I've been watching *The Sopranos* recently, and noticing that, as a group, the characters aren't very nice people. Obviously some of them are murderers, but I don't mean in that way. I just mean as people in the world—what are they doing for anyone else? How can I care about what happens to Tony Soprano? But I do. And the people in this book are likeable. They may have their moments, but for the most part there's a ton of generosity, and not in a sappy way.

I remember one of the young men in the book, during a heightened moment, saying, "You know, this isn't a soap opera we're living here." And I remember thinking, *Oh, come on, yes it is*. People's lives are like soap operas. The density of drama in their lives isn't like television, but when drama happens to them it's pretty vivid. So I think a series, where the different people could evolve as characters, would be good. The other secret desire that I have is to find a home for details that I couldn't include in the book. There were so many moments when what was going on was visual, and I couldn't capture them as a writer. I think there might be a good enough actress who could.
