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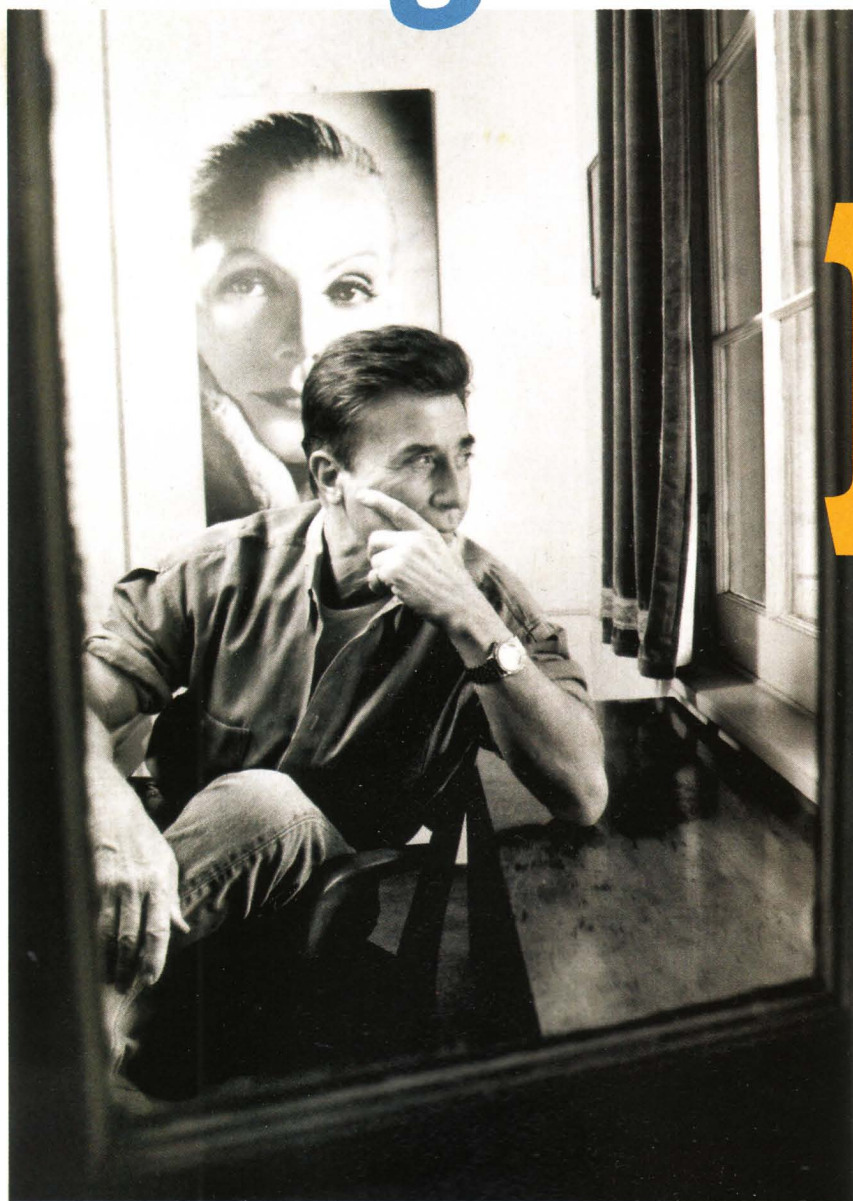


On the Cover:

» Julie Christie and Philip Seymour Hoffman at Smashbox Studios, Culver City, on November 7, 2007. Photographed exclusively for *Los Angeles* by Jill Greenberg.

No Country for Young Men

John Rechy's tragic, picaresque memoir



Forty-five years ago, when John Rechy's groundbreaking first novel, *City of Night*, was published, it won him the kind of celebrity more frequently accorded to actors: Praise for his artistic talent was often accompanied by an invitation to bed. That sort of experience, as Rechy recounts in his memoir, *About My Life and the Kept Woman* (Grove Press, 320 pages, \$24), could be dispiriting. Flush with the intellectual attention of an editor who'd flown from New York to Los Angeles to meet him, chatting with novelist Christopher Isherwood about his literary influences beside a glowing Santa Monica fireplace, the neophyte author would suddenly feel the cold thrust of ulterior motive. A dozen novels and three nonfiction works later, Rechy is now an L.A. institution, but he still winces at the humiliating sense of having unbuttoned his mind too quickly.

Of course, his male fans had some reason to believe their attentions might be acceptable. *City of Night* was based on Rechy's own adventures as a gay hustler. The mistake his propositioners made was tendering an offer that belonged on another turf. For Rechy, author and hustler were mutually exclusive identities. To put one on was to take off the other. *About My Life and the Kept Woman* traces Rechy's evolution both as a gay man and as a writer, but as the book makes clear, his sense of self as a

series of uniforms began long before he knew he was either one.

Born in El Paso in 1934, Rechy grew up in a community of exiles, educated Mexicans who'd fled their country after dictator Porfirio Díaz was ousted in 1910. Their fortunes may have declined steadily ever after, but refugees like Rechy's father, a university-trained musician who remembered family dinners with Díaz and mourned the cultured life he'd left behind, were anxious to distinguish themselves from the laborers who made up most of El Paso's Mexican population. Appearances were all-important. Rechy, fair-haired like his father's Scottish forebears, was praised for his "Spanish" good looks—and cast as the boy Jesus in a traveling theater production—while his paternal grandmother contemptuously referred to his dark-skinned oldest sister as "La India." School reinforced the distinctions. Rechy was mistaken for an Anglo until it became clear he spoke only Spanish. Even then, his teacher changed his name from Juan on the grounds that he "looked much more like a Johnny."

About My Life and the Kept Woman breaks up the sociology with a skillfully paced story that brings the exiles' disparate proprieties into focus. Rechy's older sister Olga is preparing to marry her high school sweetheart

when disaster looms: The groom's sister has declared her intention of attending the ceremony. The kept woman of the title, she has been banished from her father's door since she became the mistress of a Mexico City politician. With the groom's father vowing to rise from his sickbed to disrupt the wedding and thwart his unruly children, the bride's father equally adamant that the ceremony go ahead as planned (he knows his daughter is pregnant), and Rechy's aunts sniping about the disgrace of marrying into the family of a fallen woman (never mind that their gangster brother in Juárez keeps a mistress, too), the tale teeters breathlessly between tragedy and farce.

It's the figure of the mistress glimpsed smoking alone in a room at the reception that's the 12-year-old Rechy's fondest memory. Perfectly composed, discreetly veiled, she becomes an image he returns to at each stage of his memoir—an outcast at once unapproachable and irresistible. The boy who will go on to equate sex with how much desire he can provoke and to burnish a wardrobe of iconic gestures—curl over forehead, boot against the wall—already senses a kinship. The writer, anxious to give his own life the purposeful shape of fiction, can't leave the mistress alone—even when

his repeated invocations of his one glimpse of the Garboesque figure break rather than build the mood.

When City of Night was published in 1963, America's social landscape was deceptively placid. A revolution may have been brewing, but universities still expected women students to wear skirts to class and men to keep their hair above their collars. Homosexuals were acknowledged to exist—at least in sophisticated urban circles—but could be jailed for acting on their desires, even with a consenting adult in a private home. Most became adept at camouflage.

By flaunting the homosexual underground that flourished in defiance of the law, by celebrating what was supposed to be shameful—sex for money, transvestite chic—*City of Night* brought the revolution closer. If older readers, gay as well as straight, were shocked by the book's frankness and resented its glorification of mumbling blue-jeaned toughs, others of all sexual persuasions connected with Rechy's sensual evocation of glamour and grunge.

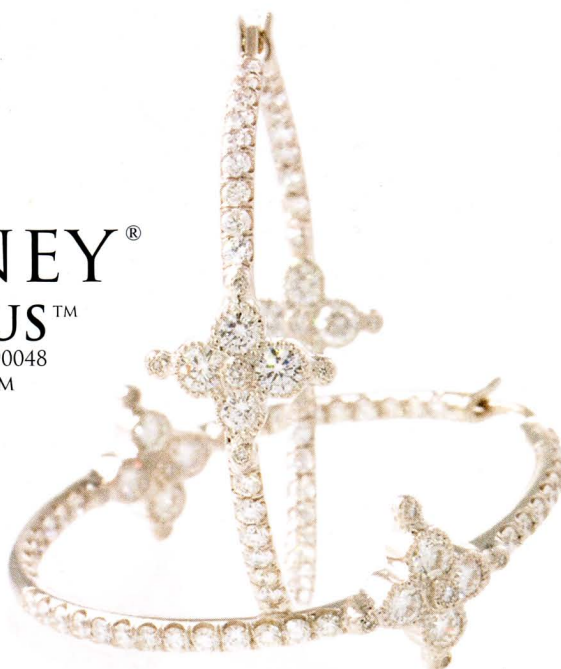
The book made its intentions clear from the first sentence: "Later I would think of America as one vast City of Night stretch-

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ing gaudily from Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard—jukebox-winking, rock-n-roll moaning: America at night fusing its dark cities into the unmistakable shape of loneliness." That Allen Ginsberg-meets-Roy Orbison rhythm, street slurred, hypnotic, suggested that relentless immoderation was as characteristic of America as puritanical denial.

Ironically, the world Rechy was describing was almost as straitlaced as his language was free. Intimacy, as he explains in *About My Life*,

of detachment and abandon would become hallmarks of his writing.

Rechy continued to expose aspects of gay culture in novels like *Numbers* (1967), which follows Johnny Rio, an aging hustler, as he tries to wean himself from the lure of cruising Griffith Park, and *Rushes* (1979), which focuses on a cross section of customers at a New York work-boots-and-amyl-nitrite bar in the years just before AIDS. He's also extended his range—to Hollywood and the

wants us to see everything through his eyes. Even in later novels like *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez* that draw on his Mexican American family, we feel we know his characters best from the outside, by their belongings and their behavior. They're brilliantly evoked types.

That domineering viewpoint stunts the second half of *About My Life*, where Rechy, surveying his adult years, rehashes literary quarrels and repeats old gossip. But his didactic streak, that wanting to pull back and explain his characters, works to his advantage as he explores his beginnings. The country he is writing about—an America of rigid gender roles and a deep suspicion of sexuality—may be as strange to subsequent generations as the alleys of Times Square were to earlier readers. As a memoirist, Rechy is both participant and observer, and he segues as easily between narrative and exegesis as his younger self did between the lure of the wild streets and the embrace of his traditional family. His relatives emerge here as characters in their own right, especially his proud and irrational father, marshaling his family to listen to a radio broadcast of *Carmen* while he conducts the invisible orchestra, tears rolling down his cheeks. True stories, as Rechy has always understood, are the ones we can't forget. ■

Some novelists enjoy creating a character who runs away with the story. John Rechy prefers to maintain control. He wants us to see everything through his eyes.

was prohibited. Both buyer and seller had fantasies to maintain. Hustlers were supposed to be macho—and therefore, by definition, unable to write a lyrical paragraph or appreciate Colette. As for Rechy, he was still insisting he wasn't gay. Yet he remained analytical in the midst of arousal, wondering "why being paid for sex without reciprocation on my part—over and over and over, never enough—held me so powerfully." Those alternating currents

porn industry in the apocalyptic *Bodies and Souls* (1983) and to the Texas of his youth in the picaresque *The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens* (2003).

An expert on the mechanics of desire and on the subtle ways we clothe that universal drive, Rechy is often less successful penetrating individual hearts. Some novelists enjoy creating a character who runs away with the story. Rechy prefers to maintain control. He



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