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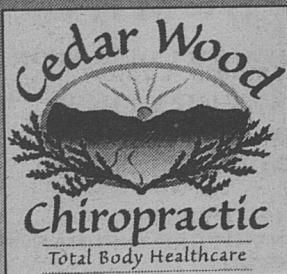
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# queer classics: john rechy's "city of night"

By Ernie McLeod

In the Introduction to a reissue of his 1963 work, *City of Night*, John Rechy explains that the novel began as a letter to a friend and was "a culmination of the years I had spent traveling back and forth across the country ... moving in and out of lives, sometimes glimpsed briefly but always felt intensely." The letter led to a short story, which led – after encouragement from editors – to an autobiographical first novel. When the novel came out, however, there was a question as to whether its author existed.

Alfred Chester (himself gay) wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that although the jacket showed an "adorable picture" of the author, he could "hardly believe there is a real John Rechy." He went on to say, bitchily, that *City of Night* read like "the unTrue Confessions of a Male Whore as told to Jean Genet, Djuna Barnes, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal ..." and so on. The review was given the dismissive, ever-so-slightly homophobic title "Fruit Salad," and other critics speculated which already-established author had, under a pseudonym, actually penned the scandalous work.

Meanwhile, the real Rechy was – by choice – back on the streets, anonymously hustling. *City of Night* stayed on the best-seller lists for months.

Even after his existence was no longer challenged, Rechy's male whore reputation overshadowed his artistic one: "I was being viewed and written about as a hustler who had somehow managed to write, rather than as a writer who was writing intimately about hustling – and many other subjects."

Certainly, all the gay hustler works since *City of*

*Night* – and there've been a number – owe a debt to Rechy. It's no accident that Gus Van Sant gave River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves copies of the novel to prep them for their rentboy roles in *My Own Private Idaho*.

I was prepared to find *City of Night* quaintly raunchy, seedily diverting – I hoped! – but minor. What surprised me is how well it has stood the test of time. Sure, some of the language and situations are dated, and most urban gay lives today aren't as desperate as the ones portrayed in the novel. But – then as now – Rechy was exploring the fringes, articulating lives that aren't ever likely to blend into the mainstream. As Frank Browning put it in his review of a much more recent (but thematically related) Rechy novel, *The Coming of the Night*: "His work is fundamentally at war with the current buffed and blow-dried gay rights movement." Amen to that.

The novel has no plot beyond following the nameless narrator on his city-to-city sexual journey, recording the "narcissistic pattern" of his youth-obsessed existence. He wants only to be desired, not to desire others. As one character observes of him late in the novel: "You want, very much, to be loved – but you dont [sic] want to love back, even if you have to force yourself not to."

Eventually, the narrator's vulnerabilities surface; he allows himself the possibility of love, if not its actuality.

The novel's prose is stylized throughout, some chapters influenced – Rechy says – by Greek tragedy, others by algebraic equations or childhood games. Its studded with irregular grammar and capitalizations, gay street slang rubbing up against philosophical poetics. Generally

descriptive *City of Night* chapters alternate with portrait chapters titled after characters encountered along the way. Appropriately, perhaps, things sometimes get a little overripe.

It was the portrait chapters that unexpectedly moved me. On the surface, they seemed mere stereotypes: Pete, the jaded hustler with the innocent core; Miss Destiny, the drag queen who dreams of a "fabulous" wedding; Lance, the desired-by-everyone Hollywood Legend primed for a fall; Someone, the terrified closeted married man; Neil, the kinky uniform addict; Sylvia, the world-weary bar matron; Dave and Jeremy, the decent guys who challenge the narrator's disbelief in love.

In a radio interview, Rechy said he is a champion of stereotypes because they exist. True – the trick is to make the stereotype flesh and blood. He does this by viewing his characters through a clear, unjudgmental and compassionate lens. That he managed this in 1963, without cleaning things up or taking a morally superior stance, is astonishing – and is probably what got so many critics' panties in a wad.

Rechy was born in 1934 and raised in El Paso, the child of a Mexican mother and a Scottish father. Temperamentally, he favored his Mexican mother. He wrote throughout his childhood, but when it came time for college, he joined the army. After the military stint, he went to New York to enroll at Columbia but instead wound up on Times Square. Occasionally, he would flee the streets only to return, imagining them "like a repentant lover eager to make up, with added intensity, for lost moments."

Most of *City of Night* was written on a rented typewriter at his moth-