

But there is a nagging undercurrent: the sado-masochistic subculture... the machanistic quality of promiscuous/public sex... "the sabateur" in Rechy who battles against the "sexual revolutionary" ... the spectre of suicide....

While the triumph of liberation despite oppression and repression are the main themes of the novel, they are very nearly eclipsed by doubt and by the realities of life in the subculture.

Now, in his latest novel, Rushes (1979), Rechy deals directly with those doubts, those conflicts that have run throughout his novels, never completely surfacing, never before finding complete articulation, and therefore always previously outside the realm of analysis.

Having survived years of self-alienation, having finally come out, he is now able to squarely face "the sabateur," finally able to understand the topic of gay self-oppression, as it is objectively, in an intellectual, analytic way.

The essential question of the novel is this: How much of the gay subculture is our chosen expression of rebellion and triumph, and how much of it is a garbage heap that we've been forced into? Rechy emphasizes the latter. The subculture is, after all, part of the larger culture; it, too, is homophobic.

The role-playing of the 50s and 60s, the sado-masochism of the 70s, are essentially expressions of homophobic morality. As such, they represent internalized oppression.

The self-hatred that we learned from the homophobic environment is transferred into the gay subculture. In a Greenwich Village leather bar, the Rushes, we see gays trapped in double binds and self-defeating contradictions.

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**"One longs for the good old days of Judy Garland and closet parties, before the complications of public, politically conscious gays."**

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One gets up in leather and demands relationships of dominance and humiliation. Rechy himself is unable to love or be loved, committed to a life of casual sex in bars and docks and backstreets.

Rechy views all these manifestations of self-oppression. Exalting power and violence, urinating on your lover, pretend-beating and verbal abuse in the language of homophobia, affecting machismo do not represent liberation any more than did the suicide-worshipping cults of Garland and Monroe in an earlier period.

The commoditization of sex in bar life is not liberation. Outside in the streets, gangs beat, maim and kill gays. Inside the bar, gays reproduce the violence in the ritual of S & M and egotistical sexhunt. Queer-bashing, S & M, the inability to love are all the same thing, all expressions of homophobia.

**R**ushes is perhaps Rechy's best novel yet, certainly the best since City of Night. All his previous works point toward the conclusions he draws. More than any of his other works, Rushes, shows an understanding of social forces and individual psychologies.

Rechy is able to positively overcome his alienation through understanding. Having transcended his self-estrangement, he now stands over and above not only himself, but his society as well.

Rushes provides an introspective, critical perspective now badly, even desperately, needed in the subculture. At this time the gay subculture and gay politicians are self-assured and self-satisfied with gay ghettos and the middle-class politics of "gay rights", rather than gay liberation.

The perspective offered by Rechy isn't likely to be greeted by praise and accolades by the people who have always dismissed him as a pornographic pulp novelist.

Nonetheless, progress toward liberation demands honesty about gay self-oppression. It demands especially that we not mistake internalizations of homophobia for liberation. Ultimately, universal gay liberation must mean more than ghettos and individual comings-out.

Rechy shows how repression and homophobia lead directly to gay self-hatred, and self-hatred leads directly to self-oppression.

Gay liberation cannot occur as specialized cases within heterosexual society. It must involve basic changes in social relationships and culture. These are the conclusions to which Rechy's works point, giving directions for the gay movement.