

Rushes:

A Review

by Nelson Lancaster

John Rechy's works provide a chronicle, not only of his life both in and out of the closet, but, more profoundly, of changes in the gay subculture and in gay consciousness.

In many ways Rechy's evolving consciousness and self-consciousness parallels the evolution and development of gay sexual politics.

Again and again, a theme occurs that unifies Rechy's work and provides a basis for his evolution: the theme of alienation. In particular, Rechy explores the alienation conditioned by repression of homosexuality: gay rage, both outwardly and inwardly directed.

Rechy's work can be divided into two periods: sexually repressed and sexually liberated. His early, sexually repressed books concern his struggles with homosexuality.

In these books, Rechy describes repression and alienation as one who is experiencing them, feeling them, living them. There is much truth but less analysis.

Repression inhibits him, fear overwhelms him, dread and loathing threaten to consume.... Yet he remains magnetically attracted to the gay subculture.

In City of Night (1963) he exists there under the cover of being a "straight" prostitute selling sex to "queer" johns. An accurate description of part of subculture life in the late 50s and early 60s, the novel provides insight into one of the ways that gay men are divided against themselves through sexual repression and alienation.

Prostitution is presented as a metaphor and a symptom at the same time for a pervasive alienation that divides self, others, and society in general.

But rather than completely understand and conquer repression and alienation, Rechy capitulates. He doesn't come out, he retreats, and the novel ends with a nervous breakdown.

From there, a string of books contains various mixtures of subterfuge and progress. The general trend of these works is toward more and more self-awareness,

though not in an absolutely linear progression: there are twists and turns along the way toward coming out.

Numbers deals with sexual compulsion, though the author implicitly identifies himself as "straight." This Day's Death is about oppression in the particular form of police-harassment, and though still "straight," Rechy makes political progress.

In The Fourth Angel he deals with self-hatred and the conscious numbing of one's humanity. This numbing is connected with homosexuality and its repression; the work is evidently drawn from lessons learned in the sado-masochistic subculture. But this again is partly obfuscated: the main character (Rechy) is "straight."

Finally, in Vampires (1971), Rechy makes the retreat of nihilism. Defining morality and evil in very Christian terms, he finds the whole world hopelessly evil, hopelessly corrupt. Innocence is maimed, raped, destroyed.

**"We're fighting on two fronts -
one on the streets,
the other inside."**

The novel seems to be an attempt at exorcising, disclaiming, repressing homosexuality, which is disguised as "evil." Rechy seems to have given up "and there was nothing but a pure, pure blackness." (Vampires, 276.)

Finally, Rechy came out. After a six year silence, The Sexual Outlaw was published in 1977. For the first time, Rechy places himself clearly among the gays, no longer pretending to be "straight," no longer repressing his homosexuality.

The Sexual Outlaw is less a novel than a series of essays and descriptions, a spirited, triumphant defense of homosexuality and gay lifestyles.

(RUSHES, cont. p. 10)