

March 23, 2008

## Body of Work

To the Editor:

In his review of my book "About My Life and the Kept Woman" (March 2), David Leavitt seems to have reviewed, instead, the photographs of me on my Web site. In his opening paragraph, he dwells on the "beefcake" photos he claims he found there, photos "one would more usually encounter on, well, different kinds of Web sites." The coy implication is that those photographs would be appropriate on pornographic sites. (Not one of those photographs would be out of place in any mainstream periodical.) He laments the absence of "a typical author photo." A few paragraphs later, he returns to the subject of the photographs. He ends his review with yet another reference.

In his fascination with those photos, Leavitt does not bother to note that there are also photographs of my family, my father, my mother, my sisters and brothers, several non-"beefcake" photos of me, including me as a child, and several "typical author" photos.

To get to the photos that arrested his attention, Leavitt had to ignore the first page of my site, which lists my various literary honors, including PEN Center USA's lifetime achievement award. Farther on, he would have found dozens of essays by me on many subjects — on writing, on film, on literature — subjects much more pertinent to my writing than the photos that enthralled him.

John Rechy  
Los Angeles

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To the Editor:

I feel the need to respond to David Leavitt's biased and meanspirited review of John Rechy's memoir.

By frankly writing about homosexual experiences in the 1950s and '60s with sensitivity and skill, Rechy in his early books broke taboos and paved the way for future generations of gay writers. "City of Night" in particular has touched thousands of readers through the years with its portrayal of outcasts masking their true identities while searching for acceptance in a callous world. Leavitt sets the tone for his prejudice by attempting to diminish Rechy's literary achievement in the first paragraph of his review: "Across a divide of 30 years defined by the AIDS crisis, these books can seem dated, even quaint." Does he mean to suggest that the experiences and emotions of gay men before AIDS are somehow not significant? Is the plight of Anna Karenina less powerful because of the passage of 130 years?

Criticizing "beefcake" photographs from Rechy's Web site, Leavitt shows bias against Rechy's body as well as

his body of work: "Leaning in classic muscle-queen posture against an invisible wall. It's the very opposite of a typical author photo." This suggests that an author must look a certain way in order to be taken seriously. Yet it is difficult to take a review seriously that starts off with such a thesis. Rechy's pride in his appearance is part of his personality. Even esteemed authors are allowed to express their individual personas any way they see fit.

Leavitt very well may have found the book's prose "at its best ... serviceable. At its worst ... trashy." But when he asserts his opinions by returning to Rechy's body — "literary ineptitude is as much a part of Rechy's persona as the oiled chest and the jeans unbuttoned at the top" — all other criticisms expressed in the review that might be considered legitimate become suspect.

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New York

The writer is the author of "Outlaw: The Lives and Careers of John Rechy."

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