

The power of desire

BY NINA REVOYR

About My Life and the Kept Woman

John Rechy

Grove Press: 320 pp., \$24

“O H, my God, look what just walked in! Hold me, girls, I'm going to fai-ai-ai-ai-nt!” So is John Rechy greeted upon his arrival in Los Angeles, as he walks into a downtown gay bar. It is the mid-1950s, and the gushing welcome could mark the responses both of the bar patrons and the mainstream literary world. A few years later, Rechy's first novel, “City of Night” — a thinly veiled autobiographical work describing the life of a male hustler — would become a literary sensation, launching a career that has spanned 45 years and more than a dozen books and was honored by PEN USA's first Lifetime Achievement Award. With looks that turned heads wherever he went, Rechy famously continued to hustle even after his place as a literary icon was secure. He has been revered by some for his unflinching portraits of a sexual underworld and his exposure of hypocrisy, reviled by others for his unabashed promiscuity. But in both his work and his life, he has always been uncompromising.

Now Rechy has documented his first decades in a new memoir, “About My Life and the Kept Woman.” It's a fascinating journey, starting with his childhood in the poor Mexican neighborhoods of El Paso, where his big-hearted, unflappable Mexican mother and artistically frustrated Mexican-Scottish father struggle to prepare their five children for the outside world. From there we follow Rechy to what is now Texas Western College, to Germany during the Korean War, to Paris and New York, and finally to Los Angeles, where he quickly becomes a hit on the cruising scene of Pershing Square and begins his literary career.

Along the way, there are cameos by several famous figures: Eleanor Roosevelt, Christopher Isherwood, Liberace and Allen Ginsberg, to name a few. Part of the book's appeal, in fact, lies in Rechy's deep involvement in the social and cultural milieu of post-World War II America. For many segments of society, it was a harsh and unwelcoming time. Anti-Mexican prejudice was extreme, as evidenced in Rechy's world by racially divided neighborhoods, limited school and job opportunities and segregated movie theaters. And being gay was a matter of serious legal consequence. Police raids of gay bars were common; it was illegal for a man to dress as a woman; and Sen. Joseph McCarthy “was extending his hunt from ‘commies’ to ‘perverts’ in Washington,” sparking “an exodus of homosexuals to Los Angeles.”

Given the strict social mores of the time, it is perhaps not surprising that masculine hustlers like Rechy clung to their convictions of straightness. By their tortured logic, as long as you were paid — and you didn't reciprocate contact — you could confidently state that you were “not queer.” These rules were absolute: In one of the sadder sequences of the book,

Nina Revoyr's new novel, “The Age of Dreaming,” will be published in April.

Luke, a handsome young hustler new to Pershing Square, is ostracized for showing desire for another man.

Rechy himself is tortured. As a child, ashamed of his family's poverty, he arranges to be picked up at fake addresses in wealthier neighborhoods. Rejected repeatedly for his Mexican heritage, he makes use of his ambiguous ethnic appearance to pass as Anglo when the stakes are high — opting, for example, to sit on the “white” side of a small-town Texas theater and denying his ethnicity when the Border Patrol rousts a Mexican family crossing into the U.S. For years he denies being gay too, taking comfort in the fiction that his hustling is somehow unconnected to his attraction to men. And after the publication of his first two novels, he has difficulty reconciling Johnny Rio, the fictional hustler, with John Rechy, the bookworm and author.

But perhaps Rechy's defining characteristic is his need to be desired. This need is not separate from struggles with his ethnic, class and sexual identity — but it develops a life of its own, playing out in an endless search for sexual contacts, as he grapples with “doubts that . . . could be exorcised only by more sex, multiple manifestations of my desirability to fill the deep emptiness exposed.” Long after he stops needing the money he earns for sex, he still needs people to be willing to pay for him. And the specter of age looms large in a world where 25 is considered too old.

Rechy's story is colored by equal parts self-disgust and self-aggrandizement, and to his credit he doesn't shy away from its uglier elements. Yet even in the midst of his self-critique, he can't resist cataloging all the people — especially the famous ones — who have come on to him. It's as if the original encounters hadn't been affirmation enough: He has to make sure everybody knows about them.

Serving as a counterpoint to Rechy's struggles and self-doubt is Marisa Guzman, the “kept woman” of the title. Sister of the man whom Rechy's sister Olga marries, Marisa has been ostracized by her family for being the mistress of Augusto de Leon, a powerful Mexican politician. She appears exactly once, in the beginning of the book, when Rechy stumbles upon her during Olga's wedding reception. Considered scandalous to others, Marisa represents for young Johnny the height of elegance, daring and dignity. Every strong, mysterious woman he encounters through the rest of the story evokes memories of the kept woman, including her niece Alicia Gonzales, who hides her Mexican background and whose deceptions and self-inventions mirror Rechy's own.

But we never see the kept woman again, although Rechy flashes back to that initial encounter — awkwardly — whenever something significant occurs in



JAMIE RECTOR For the Times

WORLD OF DANGER: *John Rechy's memoir is his 15th book.*

his life. Her disappearance comes at great cost to the story. Because Marisa is so compelling, and because of the expectations set up by the memoir's title and first powerful chapters, we keep hoping she'll reappear, but all we get is that single exquisite snapshot. She haunts the book the way she haunts Rechy's psyche, but ultimately it is frustrating to have such an intriguing character dangled in front of us and then whisked away.

Rechy also glosses over certain significant events — the Watts riots, the assassination of JFK, the death of Marilyn Monroe — in a way that feels perfunctory. These are minor flaws, but they do point up the challenges of arranging a life story that is not just a catalog of events but a unified work of art. And while Rechy's account of writing his early books and the aftermath of their publication is interesting, it's no substitute for the works themselves. His memoir falls short of the energetic, drunken, gorgeous prose of the novels; the euphoria of a repressed voice finally able to shout; the work of a pained, passionate man who, in writing and life, shook free of the bonds of forced silence and proper decorum.

For those readers who already know John Rechy, “About My Life and the Kept Woman” will provide additional insight. But if you have never read Rechy, go back to his early novels. There you will find a world of possibility and magic and danger — a world where adventure lurks around every corner and where Johnny Rio (and John Rechy) will always remain young and charismatic and beautiful. ■