

## BOOKS &amp; IDEAS

# John Rechy's intensified reality

Accustomed to causing a stir, the L.A. writer unhesitatingly steps across a boundary into 'a new kind of nonfiction.'

By STEFFIE NELSON  
Special to *The Times*

**T**HE iconic L.A. writer John Rechy has just published a memoir, "About My Life and the Kept Woman," and he wants to make clear right away that he made stuff up.

"I consider writers a hierarchy of liars," Rechy said on a recent afternoon, "and the autobiographer is the biggest liar of all."

He was sitting in the dining room of the Beachwood Canyon home he shares with Michael Snyder, a movie producer and his partner of more than 20 years, surrounded by luminous black-and-white portraits of Hollywood stars like Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe. Now 76, Rechy remains best known for the 1963 novel "City of Night," a semiautobiographical window into the world of gay street hustling that has influenced artists as diverse as Jim Morrison, David Hockney and Gus Van Sant, who has long wanted to make it into a movie. ("Maybe I should talk to John about that again," Van Sant wrote in an e-mail, calling the book "an American masterpiece.")

Still, if "City of Night" remains a classic of the underground and his 11 other novels have drawn steady critical attention, Rechy feels he has never been given his due by the larger literary world. In his view, he occupies a literary gay ghetto.

Perhaps his turn to a nonfictional form in "About My Life," which has received strong early reviews, will change that — as long as no one expects that he's told the truth, in this era of almost constant alarm over the factual basis of memoirs.



JAMIE RECTOR For *The Times*

**OUTSPOKEN:** Reflecting on common presumptions about memoirs, Rechy, here at his home, says, "The pretense that it's all truth to me is offensive."



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## BOOKS

John Rechy says 'About My Life' shouldn't be read as the absolute truth. *Page 11*

"This is the closest I have ever written with an adherence on antecedent," Rechy said of the book that begins in El Paso, Texas, when he is a boy. "But the pretense that it's all truth to me is offensive." He gestured to a photograph hanging above the fireplace. "We say that's Joan Crawford, but it's not! It's a face, re-created by light. Nobody ever looked like that in reality, but who could say that it's faked? No, that is itself now; it has its own identity, its own reality."

Rechy's fascination with glamour and artifice started early, when, as a first-generation Mexican American in a segregated border town that was "poor, drab and ugly," he encountered a woman who would come to haunt his imagination and symbolize the freedom and courage to be true to oneself (something Rechy, "outlaw" stance notwithstanding, didn't fully achieve until middle age). She was Marisa Guzman, the scandalous "Kept Woman" of the book's title, and she touched Rechy's life at the wedding of his sister Olga and Guzman's brother Luis. The mistress of one of Mexico's most powerful men, she had come to El Paso for the occasion despite her father's threats to kill her if she did, and this defiant act took on mythical status in Rechy's memory, particularly after his mother, whom he adored, defended her amid nasty gossip.

In one passage he describes seeing her, sitting by herself at the reception, wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a veil and smoking a cigarette, her lips "a bold slash of crimson": "It had to be her. No one else would look like that, not in El Paso, not in the world that I knew. . . . The kept woman challenged the drabness of the room, splashed it with a grandeur it had never possessed, not even when new. . . . I was sure then that never again would I glimpse a creation as spectacular as the one my eyes, dry from staring, remained fixed on."

That was the only time Rechy ever saw the kept woman, and the singular memory is woven through the narrative of "About My Life" like the refrain of a song, popping up at pivotal moments: for instance, the time he announced his Mexican heritage to an openly bigoted woman; or when he was fired from his job editing his small college newspaper because he and his writing were perceived as "strange"; or the time, on leave from the Army during the Korean War, that he invited a man back to his Paris hotel room but immediately told him he couldn't stay; or the night a fellow hustler in Los Angeles slept on his floor while he lay awake in bed, both of them unable to admit to being "queer."

### His response: a guffaw

**R**ECHY acknowledged that at these crucial moments of his life, he may or may not actually have thought of Marisa Guzman. "But I had to give it form. Otherwise it's as meaningless as life itself." He added, "Sometimes it's necessary to invent what isn't there in order to clarify what is."

And that evidently goes for entire scenes, one of which is a climactic moment of the book that ties things together just a touch too neatly. Asked point-blank if the moment actually happened, Rechy guffawed. "No! But it should have happened. And so, because it should have happened, here it does."

He added, "I think it's one of the best scenes I've ever written."

As if to further confuse matters, Rechy noted that he has been working for the past 20 years on another book, called "Autobiography: A Novel." "Just the title conveys my thinking. Parts of ['About My Life'] would have been part of that, but it started assuming its own form."

That form, he said, is a new kind of nonfiction. "It's pompous, but what the hell: I like to think literature is moving toward a good new form that has its own reality, along the lines of what I'm doing."

Incidentally, Rechy has no problem with James Frey's claims that "A Million Little Pieces" was true, and he disparages Oprah Winfrey's "public whipping" of the author. "I thought . . . that's really something, how dare she? The book was a success. He changed lives, supposedly, gave people some hope."

Rechy's editor at Grove Press, Amy Hundley, agreed that he is bending the parameters of nonfiction, to a point. "I do think it's a new form, but it also feels classical, in a way. There is something very poetic about it. It's like an ode."

"The thing that I think makes it very much of this moment is the transparency he has at a time when the memoir is very tendentious or argued about in our culture — the reliability of the narrator. There's been a lot of debate in the past couple of years about the reliability of memory, and I think John is very daring in being very upfront about that."

Throughout the book, Rechy takes us through the process of remembering itself, questioning and adjusting images in his mind, a literary device borrowed from Proust. Describing his introduction to the world of "cruising," a critical moment in his sexual awakening, he wrote, "I stood near, but not within, the muted, slow procession of men, watching intently, studying it all, until, now — but exactly when? — I realized I was moving in to join it."

We readers are also privy to the uncovering of a deeper, more painful memory that Rechy has never written about before: his father's brutal reign over the family, and his possible sexual molestation of his 6-year-old son. Even as Rechy puts it into words in "About My Life," "Fondling me? — perhaps fondling me," he resists the implications. "I must reject this memory," he goes on, "withhold it even now as I set it down, shelter him from the monstrous accusation, disguise it with ambiguity."

But if Rechy seeks to protect his father, a talented composer who fled to El Paso after the Mexican Revolution and forever after lived "in an angry trance of remembered dreams of crushed musical glory," he doesn't spare himself at all.

"That was one thing that I felt when I was writing this book," Rechy said. "It would not be self-protective. I would not withhold certain things that I consider very ugly in my life that I did."

But the ugliness he is referring to has nothing to do with his compulsive sexual appetites (once, Rechy had 27 sexual encounters in a single day) or his inability to reciprocate romantic love until he met his current partner, well into his 50s, although he is certainly holding these things up to the reader's scrutiny. Rechy, who nowadays wears a more sedate variation on what he called his "hustler drag" (jeans, motorcycle boots and leather jacket) was speaking of the subtle ways he betrayed other gay men — and by extension, himself — while "upholding my camouflage of tough on the streets." One

incident that he still carries with him was a simple interaction in a cafeteria, when two obviously gay men praised Rechy's attractiveness, and Rechy disparaged them to his (straight) companion. "That was ugly and cruel and hypocritical," he said. "In unmasking, part of the book is dealing with hypocrisy."

## Simply irresistible

**R**ECHY'S hustler drag (he claims to be the first guy who dared to walk down Hollywood Boulevard without a shirt in the 1950s) was part of what made him and his books so irresistible — and so important — to successive generations of gay men. He even had an alter ego, Johnny Rio, who was more than ready for his close-up. "About My Life" contains a number of photos of "Johnny," usually shirtless. Yet Rechy, who still holds a bitter grudge against the New York Review of Books for a review of "City of Night" that was derisively titled "Fruit Salad," does not want to be reduced to the role of sexual provocateur. His editor Hundley sees him as part of "the same tradition as [James] Baldwin and Gore Vidal, coming from the social movements of the '60s and continuing that dissident tradition into the present day. That's where I would put him."

Still, however high his status climbs in the literary canon, it's as a pioneer of a new sexual frankness that Rechy's legacy is most palpable. "It's hard to separate the impact of John's books on me as a writer from their more specific influence on me as a young gay writer," said Michael Cunningham ("The Hours"), who studied with Rechy at USC before attending graduate school in Iowa. "He was one of the first people to write serious, sexy books about gay people. . . . They were literature; they weren't porn, they weren't silly romances, they weren't anything like the few books by and about gay people I had read. I suspect I'm not alone in feeling this: John's books gave a lot of us a certain sense of permission to write about our actual lives."

As a teacher, Rechy has made another indelible mark. Cunningham praised his "incredible ability to look at every story on its own merit and to talk to the nervous young writers with respect and compassion and at the same time never blow smoke. . . . In short, he was really good."

Rechy continues to teach a class he developed, film for prose writers, at USC, and he also holds private writing workshops at his home. His students have included familiar names such as Sandra Tsing Loh, Kate Braverman and Susan Compo. "When I'm teaching there is nothing other than teaching," Rechy said. "I don't allow any intrusion about the sexuality or anything like that. Of course, I don't hide who I am, but it's another compartment."

Sometimes, though, the past and the present have a way of bumping up against each other. In 1997 Rechy was presented with the PEN USA West Lifetime Achievement Award in a ballroom of the Biltmore Hotel. The first novelist ever to receive the award, he recalled standing on the stage and thinking about how, 30 years earlier, he had narrowly escaped being busted by a vice squad officer there.

"It was one of my big triumphs," Rechy said with a grin. "I kept thinking, 'Where is that sonofabitch now?'"