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# Lambda Book Report

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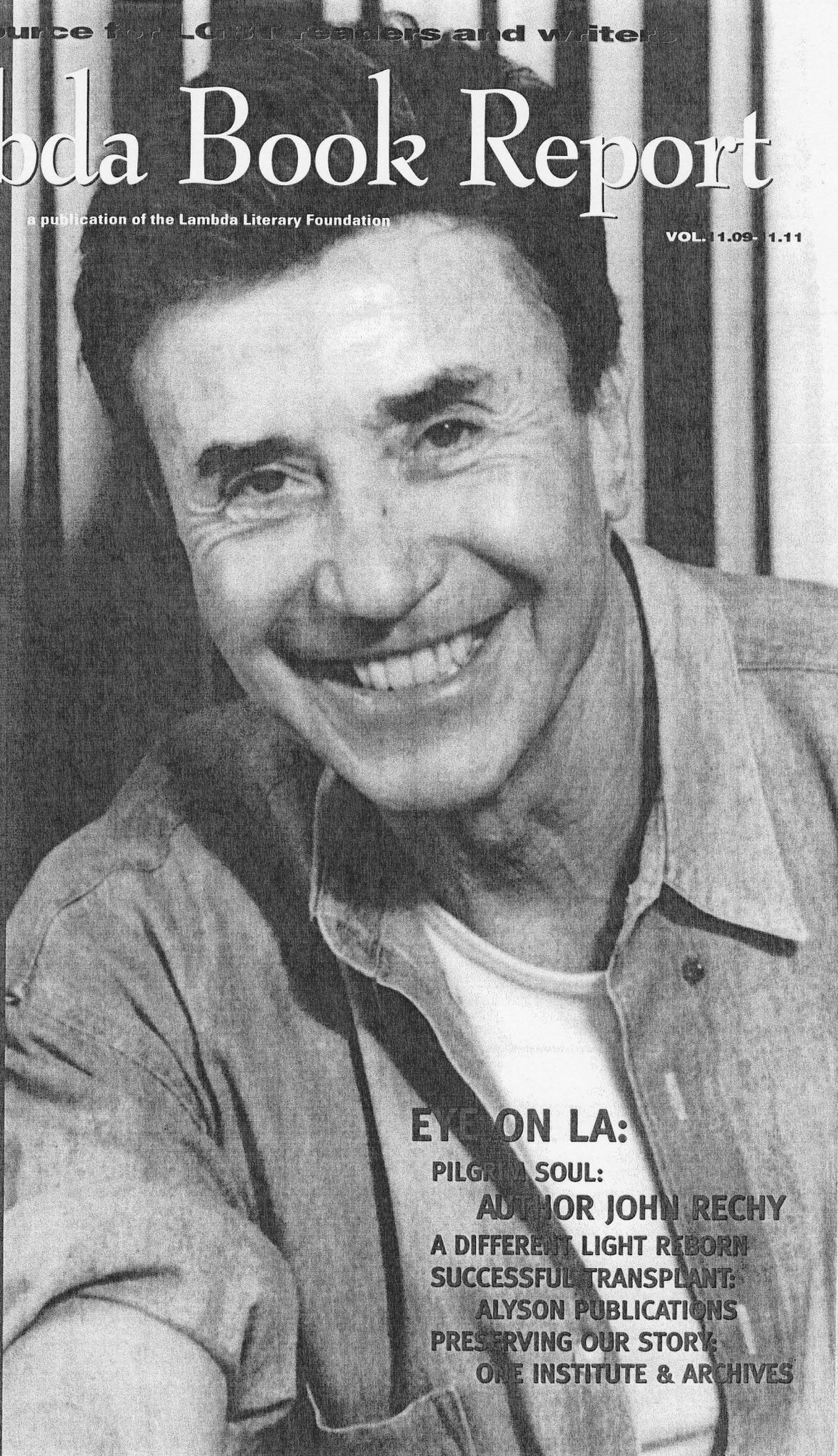
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# PILGRIM SOUL

John-Manuel Andriote interviews John Rechy

*"He could not be so brave, generous, truth-telling as he is, were he not infinitely merciful, pitiful, and tender."*  
—William Makepeace Thackeray, of *Henry Fielding and Tom Jones*



**J**ohn Rechy exploded into the nation's awareness—and onto its bestseller lists—forty years ago when he published his first novel, *City of Night*. Through the veil of fiction Rechy told what was largely his own story in the voice of a nameless young male hustler, recounting his adventures in the homosexual

underground of late 1950s Times Square and the "nightworld" of Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New Orleans.

Rechy wrote frankly and unapologetically about a world most people didn't know existed. Behind the politeness and propriety of "many-masked America," Rechy showed that "everyone is so lonesome." Everyone in Rechy's world-within-a-world of street hustlers and transvestites is there to escape their past, hoping for a brighter future, able only to believe in their youthful desirability until even it isn't enough to keep them clothed and fed.

Rechy revealed that hustler and score are really the two sides of the same mask worn to hide the loneliness inside. The "young-man" offers his body for a price; the score offers money for a few pleasurable moments; both of them desiring to live "out of the darkness and the shadowed loneliness . . . to find a substitute for Salvation."

## El Paso

Rechy's own quest for a substitute began, as does *City of Night* and several later novels, in the west Texas of his boyhood home in El Paso. Born on March 10, 1931, Juan Francisco Rechy was the son of Guadalupe Flores, a Mexican beauty from Chihuahua, and Roberto Rechy, son of the most prominent physician in Mexico City. John Rechy was named for his paternal grandfather, also named Juan Francisco Rechy.

Both parents' character defects powerfully shaped the young Rechy: the mother's "crushing tenderness," the father's rare displays of kindness that were "mere islands . . . in the ocean of his hatred." Roberto had grown up in privilege and traveled the world

as director of the Mexican Imperial Symphony. But when the entire Rechy family fled Mexico for El Paso in the 1910 revolution, Roberto found himself unable to make his living in music and forced to take increasingly menial jobs to support his family. His disappointment in his own life erupted regularly in verbal and even physical beatings of his sensitive young son, as though he could deny his own crushed dreams by trying to crush those of his offspring.

Islands in Roberto's ocean of hatred were the times he would have the young John sit on his lap, or on the laps of his male friends, and say, "Give me a thousand." The father and his gray-haired mates would fondle the boy in exchange for pennies and nickels. Toward the end of *City of Night*, the narrator says he remembers the fondling game as simply his father's way of "reassuring me, in that strange way—so briefly!—that he did . . . want me."

The young Rechy retreated from the emotional chaos around him into the world of his imagination. A voracious reader and moviegoer, a loner, and possessed of striking good looks that made both men and women stop and stare at him on the street, Rechy would escape El Paso as soon as he could. College and a stint in the army gave him a taste of the outside world. Although as a teenager he had been devoutly Catholic, the church's explanations no longer satisfied Rechy's pilgrim soul, and he set out to find a suitable substitute to fill the deep loneliness within him.

Rechy's biographer Charles Casillo writes in *Outlaw: The Lives and Careers of John Rechy* (Alyson, 2002), "As the young Rechy turned his face from God, he turned it toward the mirror. It was there he found the one person he could trust, who would love him, and who would never hurt or abandon him." Rechy resolved only to rely on himself, to love himself above all others. He vowed to allow others, particularly other men, only to desire him—never to possess him. Like the screen actresses of Hollywood's glamorous past he strongly admired, Rechy was determined to become others' fantasy. Also like these beauties, Rechy's sexual desirability "would be his ticket to survival," as Charles Casillo put it.

Returning from the army to El Paso and his beloved but enveloping mother, Rechy knew he needed a bigger break from the past. So he left his mother crying in the doorway as he set out for "freedom: New York!—embarking on that journey through nightcities and nightlives—looking for I don't know what—perhaps some substitute for salvation," he said in *City of Night*.

## Nightpeople

When a merchant marine made overtures to him at Manhattan's Sloan House YMCA, Rechy in his early twenties realized there were men who would pay more than the pennies



and nickels of his boyhood to enjoy his physical charms.

He recalled in an interview at his home in Los Angeles that when he went to Times Square after this realization it was “like I had awakened from a dream.” All around him were the denizens of the nightworld he would soon write about, living in full view of heterosexuals—yet all but invisible to those unattuned to the dynamics of the body language, the exchanged gazes, the gestures through which the hustler and score recognize each other.

Rechy was enthralled by “the terrifying spectacle of this outcast boiling world.” His narrator in *City of Night* says, “I surrendered to

the world of Times Square, and like a hype who needs more and more junk to keep going, I haunted that world not only at night now but in the mornings, the afternoons . . .” Like his fictional young hustler, Rechy fled his own innocence and shunned mutual desire in exchange for the knowledge, confirmed in cash, that he was Desirable.

It is only at the book’s climax at Mardi Gras 1958 that the narrator—and, Casillo shows us, John Rechy himself—realizes he has become trapped by the hustling world. Until then he had reassured himself that although he was participating fully in that

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world, he could always get out of “that chosen world” any time he wanted.

Like his character, Rechy’s escape was his education and ability to get a “legitimate” job, and, increasingly, his writing. In the late 1950s his short fiction was published in literary magazines such as *Evergreen Review*—alongside the likes of Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jack Kerouac. *City of Night* started out as a letter to a friend describing Rechy’s experience at Mardi Gras. An editor at Grove Press, Rechy’s publisher to this day, realized he had a major new talent on his hands.

Several times Rechy left the hustling world and took a job, only to return to the streets when the compulsion to feel desired outweighed all else. In fact, he occasionally hustled the streets of Hollywood into his forties, even after he had become a successful writer and university professor—simply to prove he could still turn heads and be paid for it.

After and between stints in other cities and visits to El Paso, the center of Rechy’s life in the late 1950s was Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles, “a block-square sunny asylum among the flowers and the palm trees, the fountains gushing gaily.” As he had been in Times Square, Rechy was fascinated by the simultaneous dimensions of experience playing out in Pershing Square, the sexual majority oblivious to the “choreography” of the homosex hunt happening all around them.

But in Los Angeles Rechy was still painfully aware of another dimension of life in Pershing Square that was as unspoken as it was ubiquitous: loneliness. He wrote of “the world of Lonely-Outcast America squeezed into Pershing Square.” The sad young men masking their hunger for love as they sell their youth to men who are no longer youthful. The drag queens dreaming of white weddings and homes in Hollywood. The scores whose self-hatred drives them to denigrate the masculinity of the young man whose manhood they just paid to enjoy. The square, “seething with all the live lonesomeness.”

## Bittersweet success

*City of Night* debuted at number 8 on *The New York Times* best-seller list when it was published in 1963, and spent nearly seven months on bestseller lists across the country. It was later published in twenty other countries. “I had no doubt that *City of Night* would be an enormous success,” wrote Rechy in his preface to a 1984 edition. “In a reversed way, I had thought it would sell modestly and that the book would be greeted with critical raves. The opposite occurred, dramatically.”

Rechy was stung by the homophobic vitriol passed off as “reviews” in some of the nation’s leading book reviews. A closeted gay man writing in *The New York Review of Books* dismissed Rechy’s masterpiece as a “fruit salad.” The reviewer, Alfred Chester, went so far as to question whether John Rechy really existed or was merely the nom de plume of another “real” writer. Rechy biographer Casillo notes that the physically repugnant Chester was bitterly envious that the sexy young man in “the adorable photo on the rear of the dust jacket,” as Chester put it, could actually be a talented writer too.

Rechy had often experienced this same putdown on the rare times he let slip with a score the fact that he was quite the opposite of the pretty-but-dumb loser they needed him (in their fantasies) to be. He would experience it many more times by those who knew him as an author yet wanted him to

live down to their fantasies of “John Rechy.” But then Rechy was adept at playing into people’s fantasies to get what he wanted—even when he had no intention of actually delivering the goods.

Fortunately *City of Night* also had outstanding reviews. *The New York Times* called it “remarkable.” *The Washington Post* said it was a “first novel that must be considered one of the major books published since World War II.” The book’s commercial success allowed Rechy to buy his mother a home in El Paso, one of his most cherished memories. But his success also left him feeling guilty because he was able to escape the nightworld when it closed in on him while those he wrote about were trapped.

He wrote sadly of the beautiful young men whose only gift was their beauty. Their limited, increasingly optionless futures too often led to a bleak decline into alcoholism and skid row, the area



John Rechy, 1967



Los Angeles' Pershing Park and Biltmore Hotel circa 1965

that literally and metaphorically hovered at the edge of the hustling scene in downtown Los Angeles. "Many of the people I wrote about inevitably would have ended up there," says Rechy, adding, "It's a curious thing, the romanticizing of the hustler, who exists mostly very briefly."

"For years I pulled away from any identification with [*City of Night*]," Rechy says, "even while living the life. I felt enormously guilty. It's a curious thing when you turn real people into art, one of the great unfairnesses. Sure all those people existed—but they never got out."

Rechy called this "the compassion that only one outcast can feel for another," and it is one of the main qualities of his writing. His compassion frequently has eluded his critics who typically focus on the sexual content of his earlier books in particular. Little wonder that another of Rechy's most autobiographical protagonists, Johnny Rio, won little sympathy given the book's surfeit of (steamy and well-written) sex.

Rechy himself was featured, in his trademark tight-fitting shirt and Levis and striking a come-hither pose, on the cover of his second novel, *Numbers* (1967), which describes Johnny's return visit to L.A. after several years back home in Laredo, Texas, away from his former hustling life. Johnny has come back to prove to himself that even in the world of the "sexhunter"—the men who cruise streets and parks for sex based on attraction rather than remuneration—he is a desirable "number" and able to rack up any number

of men he chooses. Johnny's goal for the ten-day visit is thirty men who will want him enough to kneel before his Manhood and offer oblations to his Desirability.

This one-sided (oral) sex was Rechy's own stock-in-trade as a hustler, feeding his voracious hunger to be desired. Johnny Rio and his creator struck many as the dictionary definition of narcissist. Yet Rechy says he argued about Johnny Rio with biographer Casillo. "Johnny Rio was very vulnerable," he told me. "He could be destroyed very easily. That's something people forget about narcissism, the enormity of the rejection."

Unlike Johnny Rio, the self-described narcissist Rechy is quite aware of his own "monstrous fear of rejection," the "rejections I still remember and it still hurts."

### The Death of Youth

Rechy has said that *Numbers* is "as much about dying as it is about sex." Casillo notes that the death he describes is the death of youth—the specter that haunted Rechy from a young age. Even in *City of Night*, published when he was only 32, Rechy writes, "At 17, I dreaded growing old. Old age is something that must never happen to me. The image of myself in the mirror must never fade into someone I can't look at."

At 72, Rechy says his disparaging feelings about aging haven't changed as he himself has aged. But he obviously has adapted his

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expectations to the inevitable changing reality of an aging body, though he clearly remains youthful in his outlook. "When I look in the mirror today," he says, "no, of course I don't see 'Johnny Rio'; I see John Rechy—and that pleases me. I see a man whose body is muscular and firm and in much better shape than those of my students in their twenties. I see a good-looking face that I admire and is admired."

False modesty is not one of Rechy's traits, though graciousness, even courtliness, and decorum are all apparent in his personality.

He recalls with disgust a time two students in the master class for established authors he teaches in his home were groping each other underneath the dining table. "I'm very near-sighted and didn't realize there was a man and woman messing around with each other under the table. I said, 'look, that is okay in the bushes—but NOT in my workshop!' I could not believe it."

By all accounts, Rechy is a loving and generous teacher at the University of Southern California, though he considers himself a guide rather than a teacher. He insists his students know what he has accomplished as a writer before accepting them into a writing class. "They must know who I am," he explains. "They must know that I know what I'm talking about." He talks with them frankly about his life—all his life—and models for his class the kindness he demands of them. "No one ever comes out of my workshops limping and saying 'I'll never write again,'" he says. "I tell them this: In life you have to be kind. In your writing you can be cruel. I feel like I've done that while expressing a lot of compassion."

### Salvation

Would Rechy describe himself as a spiritual person? "I wouldn't," he says, "because that gives people an unnecessary flutter of misunderstanding. I don't like mysticism and don't allow it in my classes. I'm not a conventionally religious person, but I do believe in some kind of spiritualism. I would describe it more as a responsibility to humanity. As long as one is here the only transgression I can see is cruelty."

He is appalled looking back on his own cruelties. He recalls the

times in his hustling days "when I felt I had to be faithful to the role I was in and then I did things that were cruel and that I now detest—stealing from people who picked me up. I still marvel that I was capable of doing that."

But Rechy had felt miserable about clipping a score even when he was on the scene. In the voice of the motherly bar owner Sylvia, we hear the younger Rechy telling his confreres in the world of outcasts gathered in the French Quarter for Mardi Gras and his readers beyond, "[E]ven in a world without laws—and

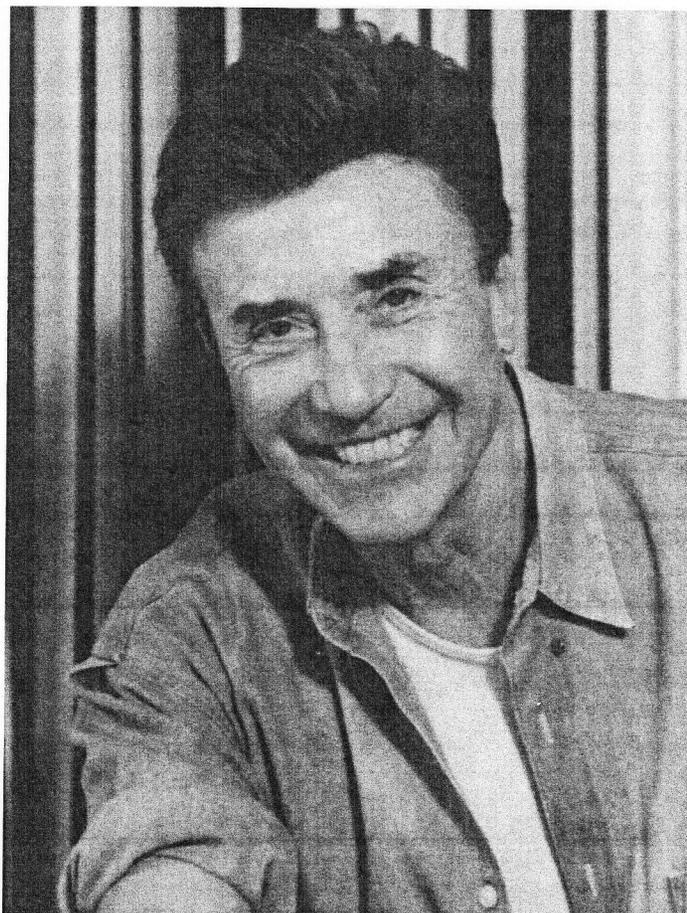
mostly, hell, we all know it—mostly it's lawless because it's a scene— . . . a scene people shun, are . . . afraid of, don't even want to know exists—even in that kind of world—well, Jesus, Holy, Christ—you've got to have some kind of—hell, yes—decency—some kind of rules. . . . There's got to be some kind of morality!"

Rechy's spare yet voluptuous writing embodies deeply spiritual ideas. He draws from the Bible and the Catholic Mass for his most powerful images. The worlds he creates are populated by angels, as he calls them, usually fallen or "dark." Dawn skies are "purgatorial purple" and Ash Wednesday brings epiphany to the hustler-narrator of *City of Night*. Both *Bodies and Souls* (1983) and *The Coming of the Night* (1999) feature a young man tattooed with a naked Christ. Orgasm itself becomes an image of "challenged death" in *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977).

Rechy says this spiritual dimension is "even more apparent in some of my so-called non-gay books. *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez* (1991) deals with miracles. *Our Lady of Babylon* (1996) deals with the creation of man. *Bodies and Souls* is about Los Angeles and the act of redemption." He adds, "There is a phrase that appears in every book I write: There is no substitute for salvation."

How is it this unreconstructed "champion of promiscuity and sexual abundance," as he described himself in our interview, also turns out to be a deeply—if not admittedly—spiritual man?

Charles Casillo suggests the answer may lie within Rechy's now twenty-plus-year relationship with movie producer Michael Snyder. Rechy fictionalized the difficult beginning of the relationship in *Rushes* (1979) in a scene of tenderness set amidst the hard-



John Rechy, today

ness of a leather bar when "Michael" and the Rechy-esque Endore recall their agreement not to be possessive and the pain keeping that agreement has caused.

"My life now is very involved with Michael," says Rechy, a quarter century after writing that scene. "We have what I consider a perfect relationship. Neither of us has ever made demands of one another. And yet the matter of choice was to me so enormous. I choose to be with him, nothing makes me. He chooses to be with me. There are no promises, no 'Oh, don't you dares,' no violations that 'If you do this, I will do that,' no 'Where have you beens'—nothing of the sort. And yet I am so entirely fulfilled."

The man who gave up counting his sex partners at 7,000 calls his longtime partner (his preferred term) "sweetheart" when Michael calls to confirm plans for dinner with friends that night at The Orangerie to celebrate Rechy's birthday. He makes clear for an interviewer who didn't seem to grasp it the first time he said there "aren't any" outside activities. "It's monogamous—but not by imposition, by choice. There's nobody I'd rather be with than Michael. And I know there's nobody he'd rather be with than me." He adds, "I consider it a miracle that out of my jumble I was not only able to meet Michael, but to become this unit that we are and still remain individuals."

With a happy long-term relationship, a move soon to a new home in the Hollywood Hills, a biography of him recently published, his own next novel (an Eighteenth Century picaresque based on Tom Jones called "The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens") about to be published, a prestigious lifetime achievement award from the PEN Center USA-West, another lifetime achievement award from the New York-based Publishing Triangle, and students who seek out his classes, John Rechy no longer needs to make himself anyone's fantasy. Instead he has created a reality for himself that isn't a substitute for the nightworld he once haunted and wrote of so vividly, but it is indeed his salvation.

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