

## **Rick Moody**

For the New Yorker magazine's 1999 annual double fiction summer issue, fiction editor Bill Buford introduced a section called "Fiction Under 40: The Future of American Fiction", in which the New Yorker fiction staff selected 20 writers under -- or as it turned out, not above -- 40 years of age who constituted "the future of American fiction". The list was eminent, and, I think, prescient, one hell of a list of authors, almost (but not quite) any one of whom I'd be thrilled to have here tonight, -- and, as it happens, we do have one, Rick Moody.... and I am thrilled.

Let me point out one extraordinary thing about that list: Of the twenty authors listed, three of them (15%), Donald Antrim, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Moody, went to the same college, Brown University, at the same time; there these three amigos studied with an older trio of cutting-edge fiction writers -- Angela Carter, John Hawkes, and Robert Coover -- and, by the time of the 1999 award, some 18 years after graduation, each had demonstrated extraordinary writing chops and significant publishing successes. Of this Brown trio, it might have seemed at that time that Antrim and Eugenides, both brilliant writers, were the more adventurous with language, while Moody, particularly in the aftermath of his elegant and poignant second novel, *Ice Storm*, set in small town Connecticut (and propelled into real fame by Ang Lee's movie of the same name), might settle for being the new generation's master novelist of the suburbs, appropriating Cheever and Updike's turf, though with a much more biting, satirical, and witty take.

Happily, I think, such was not to be, as Moody decided instead to treat the 21<sup>st</sup> century as his own experimental literary playpen. Even before the year of the award, Moody had published his third novel, *Purple America* that takes place in a single weekend -- but thereby doubling the one day time frame of *Ice Storm* -- in which a son is called home to tend his incapacitated mother suffering from an fatal degenerative disease. Though the setting is still the suburbs, we observe Moody's writing becoming more complex, imaginative, and evocative: But, as will also be the case with all his succeeding fiction, while we see almost all critics competing to place Moody's work well along an ascending trajectory to greatness, perhaps even positioned to land the grail of the great American novel, he has ever a very small group of detractors, reacting in almost Newtonian second law-like fashion, who feel compelled to play literary wack-a-mole with him.

Thus when Moody publishes his prize-winning memoir *The Black Veil* in 2002, which chronicles in brilliant and original fashion a terrible period for him in the 1980's when he was in a

destructive co-dependent relationship with a girlfriend, leading to his stay in a psychiatric ward, and eventually to this ground-breaking and prize-winning memoir, in the dialectical fashion that I've just mentioned, though reviews were glowing overall and *The Black Veil* won the NAMI/Ken Book Award and the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir, one of the self-styled bad boys of literary criticism at the time, Dale Peck, went after Moody as if on a mission to bring him down by any means possible. Peck's New Republic review became infamous, particularly its risible opening line: "Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation." Happily for all, and largely as a result of public blowback from this bizarre review, Peck withdrew entirely from reviewing soon after.

I don't have time to demonstrate how the same pattern recurs with each of Moody's increasingly daring novels, short stories, and novellas for the next decade and a half (each of which I urge you to read with real attention despite, actually because of, some formidable page counts and a few choleric critics: *Diviners* in 2005 -- a wild Pynchonesque tale about water dowsers world-wide, beginning with the Mongols and ending up in contemporary New York City -- checks in at 567 pages, while *Four Fingers of Death* in 2010 -- whose first part tracks the first manned mission to Mars (which goes catastrophically awry,) while the second part follows the maraudings of one of those doomed astronaut's severed hands, now reduced to four fingers, that creates mayhem when it alone is returned to earth -- runs a full 725 pages

And then we get to his brilliant and much shorter new book, *Hotels of North America*, an often drop-dead funny but ultimately very sad novel, composed entirely of the alleged blog posts of one R.E. Morse (say that quickly a few times), once a finance guy and motivational speaker, then a casualty of the 2008 meltdown, now one of the top ten reviewers on the *Rateyourlodgings.com* internet site, reduced, as his own life disintegrates, to reviewing increasingly seedy hotels.

Rick Moody refuses to stay in line and in category, and seems determined to explore all that our common language, yoked to his voracious imagination, is capable of. Also an avid musician and music critic, as well as a self-styled life-coach, Moody has already spectacularly fulfilled the promise foreseen in that New Yorker list of 1999. But perhaps the best news is that with six novels, two books of short stories, one of criticism, and one memoir behind him, we can continue to look forward to otherwise unimaginable Moody fictions that will, no doubt, probe and expand the frontiers of our language and our culture. I suspect it's going to be a wild ride with him, but I'll be on board the whole trip. So please welcome Rick Moody -- high on my very short list for the best writer of his generation.