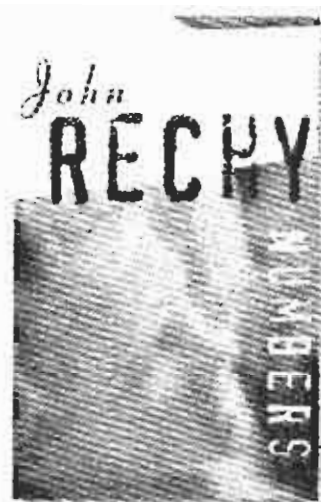
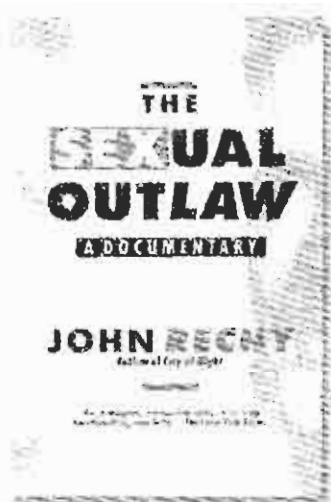
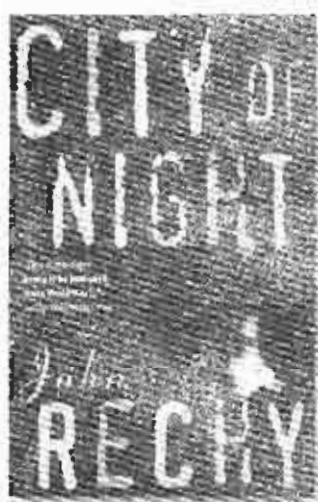


Photo by John Rechy. Photo provided by John Rechy.

# Beyond the *Sexual Outlaw*

CELEBRATED, CONTROVERSIAL AUTHOR JOHN RECHY SHARES HOW HE LIVED, THOUGHT, AND WHAT IT'S LIKE TODAY



BY J. TRACY HERMANN

It began in El Paso, author John Rechy's odyssey through the cities of the night, "in a Southwest windstorm with the gray clouds like steel doors." It was a pilgrimage that would find the young Texan of Mexican-Scottish decent hustling the streets around Time Square, the French Quarter and along Hollywood Boulevard, trading sex for money, studying the characters of life's rich pageant and eluding their intimacies—calling him back, time and time again, even after the young Rechy found success as an accomplished writer.

In his inaugural work, *City of Night* (Grove Press, 1963), Rechy first detailed the intricacies of this fascinating journey; it is a candid portrayal of the nihilistic world of street hustlers—a domain of hidden sex and ephemeral love—told through the voice of a nameless narrator. The novel became a trailblazer for the times and was lauded as a work that "ushered in a new era of gay fiction."

On Saturday, February 24, Rechy will continue his journey with a stop in the Desert, sharing his experiences as a hustler and a writer, as well as an observer and participant of life, in "An Evening With John Rechy," presented by the University of California Riverside, Palm Desert. The event will be facilitated by Professor Tom Lutz, director of UCR Palm Desert's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts program, and will include a Q&A with program attendees. It is open to the public.

"Oh, I plan to talk about anything and everything—it's going to be very conversational, and I'm

sure with Tom involved, it will be very lively," Rechy told me recently by phone from his home in Hollywood. "And I don't avoid controversy [laugh]; Needless to say, I've been controversial from the start."

When *City of Night* made its bold debut in 1963, it was indeed met with considerable controversy. The nation was, after all, still reeling from the wholesomeness of the 1950s and ... *Ozzie and Harriet* was still on the air. Although Rechy refrained from depicting scenes that included hardcore sex in the novel, the brutal honesty with which he chronicled the sexual subculture of gay street hustlers, created quite a stir for the time.

"I didn't initially intend to write about street life and my experiences with it," Rechy reported. "I struggled with the idea, but ultimately felt an obligation of writing of a world that people otherwise might not see. The surprising thing is that I didn't expect it to sell much; I did expect it, however, to be well received in the literary community. But quite the opposite was true—it was met negatively in the literary community, but it sold quite well."

What began as a letter to a friend—"I was trying to organize what I felt about my experiences," *City* became an overnight best seller, one that remained on the national best seller list for six months during the period 1963–1964. In the years that followed, it has been translated into 20 languages. The novel was also named as one of the 25 all time "best gay novels" by the Publishing Triangle in New York.

But the literary community initially snubbed its nose at Rechy's foray into their guarded realm, calling his work limited and transitory.

Finally, in 1997, some 34 years after *City* was initially published, Rechy was honored with the PEN-USA-West Lifetime Achievement Award. He has since received the Publishing Triangle's William Whitehead Award for lifetime achievement and has been awarded the first ONE Culture Hero Award by One National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

"I think, initially, some people just couldn't look past the subject of hustling," Rechy said. "I'm a very literary writer who knows what he's doing ... but I was writing gay subject matter that made some people uncomfortable. Even today, when I write books that are not centrally involved with gay life, these books are put into the gay shelves of the bookstore. I don't like labels. I don't like being called a gay writer. I'm gay—proudly so—and I'm a writer, a writer who's amassed quite a body of work."

Today, Rechy has a body of work that includes 14 books and numerous essays, each of which has achieved substantial success, although a fraction of what *City* ultimately realized. His works have garnered an enormous following, especially among gay men who see him as both a dignitary and an outlaw.

Although, all but one of his current novels is considered *fictional*—*The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (Grove Press, 1970) is a non-fictional commentary about the oppression of homosexuals—all drew from Rechy's personal experience from his life on the streets.

"There are characters in every one of my books that are autobiographical in nature. In *The Fourth Angel*, I conveyed some very intimate experiences through the eyes of a 15-year-old boy. I was able to see certain instances

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that involved me as an adult but through the characterizations of children. But I suppose *Sexual Outlaw* gets as close to any autobiography as anything ... It's where I'm trying to separate what I see as two aspects of myself, one who experiences the streets, and the other a literary man who is trying to evaluate the experiences in a greater context."

Set in the parks, streets, tunnels and beaches of contemporary Los Angeles—what Rechy calls the "battlefield of the sexual outlaw"—*Outlaw* tells the story of three days and nights in the sexual underground through the eyes of several subjects, including the author himself.

"It's my most political work to date," he continued. "And a strong commentary on sexual identity."

His own sexual identity is one that Rechy has alternately struggled with and accepted. In his early days as a street hustler, the author adopted a persona of aloofness and machismo that allowed him to remain unattached from the world around him. Later, he came to embrace the sexuality that defined those early years, writing about it again and again in novels like *Numbers* and *The Coming of Night*.

In *Numbers*, the protagonist is young, handsome and narcissistic Johnny Rio, who sets out to assure himself that he is still sexually desirable, despite the passage of time, by setting a goal of 30 sexual conquests within a predetermined span of time.

"Johnny Rio is very much a projection of me," Rechy admitted. "One day after *Numbers* was written, I was in Griffith Park doing what

I did best, and a man came up to me and said that somebody had written a book about me. Of course, he didn't recognize me as the author, but he recognized me as the character [laugh]."

Rechy's characteristic drives for sex and attention have lead several observers to suggest that he may be a sex addict. "That term sex addict really makes me laugh. Did I have abundant sex, oh yes ... my God yes, undeniably so. But being gay allows us to experience an abundance of sexuality ... I find that we should celebrate that difference in our lives from that of heterosexuals, I think we are different people—that's a very good thing. I don't like what I call heterosexual imitation, because our lives are very, very rich and I don't want to see that gone. As far as sexual addiction, I would just call it bountiful sex."

Today, Rechy lives a substantially more subdued life than he was accustomed to in his early career, sharing a home in the Hollywood Hills with Michael, his partner of 30 years.

"I'm very happy and content now," he mused. "However, I still look back on that life and think that shoot, I really like the way I lived."

## IF YOU GO

"AN EVENING WITH JOHN RECHY" will take place from 6–8 pm, February 24, in the Theater at University of California Riverside, Palm Desert. Tickets are \$20/30/125 (\$125 includes reception). For more information, call Joe Frederickson at 760.834.0590, or visit [www.events.ucr.edu](http://www.events.ucr.edu). *The BottomLine* is a proud sponsor of this event.

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