

# IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT

John Rechy talks about his new book, "The Coming of the Night" on love, fear, religion and sex in Los Angeles



LANE GANDHARA

A luminary of contemporary gay fiction, John Rechy first broke onto the international literary scene in 1963, with "City of Night"

— a journey of a young gay hustler in 1950s' America.

Thirty six years and eleven books later, Rechy returns to some of the themes and scenes of his now-classic first novel with his new work, "The Coming of the Night."

Lane Gandhara, a Los Angeles writer and a frequent contributor to fab!, met with Rechy to discuss his new book.

What prompted you to write about the wild and wanton partying scene in L.A. before AIDS?

I actually ran into it: the ending is an event I witnessed in 1981, cruising a park in West Hollywood.

Late, around 2 or 3 in the morning, a very attractive young man took off all his clothes, pushed himself against the cool shed and then proceeded to choose the people to fuck him. That same evening, I ran into a friend of mine and he said, "Have you heard about this gay illness? You think we should believe that?" "I don't know," I said. "I hope it's not true." That stuck with me because this sacrificial occurrence on that particular night was certainly going to reverberate through a lot of lives.

You've written a lot about Los Angeles. Your new book takes place here as well.

I am a champion of Los Angeles. I love the city, I think it's a grand city. I love the physicality of Los Angeles, I love its rampant narcissism, I love its health orientation and I love its profound spirituality.

Sex runs on almost every page of "The Coming of the Night." Where do you draw the line between erotica and pornography?

I am a very careful writer and this book is a literary exercise. Every character has a unique voice. It's actually a very literary book. Pornography has one goal—to arouse sexually to climax. There's nothing wrong with that. But to open up a view of a way of life, to expose it to literature and thinking, to explore it and, I hope, to illuminate it—pornography doesn't do that, that's what I do.

Your first novel, "City of Night," illumi-

nated the world of male hustling that you lived through. Is Nick, a young, gay-for-pay hustler in your new novel, a continuation of the line of earlier such characters like Chuck and Skipper?

Yes. One thing about hustling is that it's a very short life. The next wave comes in and the last one is out. I feel sometimes very guilty because I think "Jesus Christ, here I am being interviewed but where are Chuck and Skipper?" Two years ago I was the first novelist to receive the PEN West Lifetime Achievement Award. I received it at the Biltmore, in the Grand Ballroom, across from Pershing Square where I used to hustle, where I'd been kicked out years ago when a man tried to sneak me into his room. The [hustling] scene hasn't changed. That particular element just moved from the streets to, I understand, the

Internet. It's the same kind of individual that hung out on Pershing Square, hung out on Santa Monica and people who were picking them up are very much the same now.

In your new novel, you give voices to a wide cast of characters: a young kid celebrating his sexuality, a size-obsessed bodybuilder, a street hustler, a troubled couple, a leatherman, a priest and many more. But

my favorite one is implicit. It's the Santa Ana—hot, infernal, desert wind that sweeps across L.A. coming ahead of the plague, stirring up desire, violence, fires...

I'm so glad that you caught that. Yes, I put into the descriptions of the wind and fire the imagery of disaster and the coming of AIDS.

I sensed a lot of guilt in your early novels. In your current writing it seems to have disappeared.

There's a difference between 1963 [when "City of Night" was published] and the fact that I've grown and matured and obviously my attitudes have changed. Like many people who were on that scene I was going through a lot of problems of identity.

How is it different for you in the 90s?

I'm thrilled and disappointed. Disappointed because so many of the negative things in our own world are still being left unexplored and those of us who sometimes even mention them are criticized. Thrilled—because one can drive down Santa Monica Boulevard and gay men are everywhere openly. This is absolutely thrilling and I hope I have something to do with that.

John Rechy's new novel, "The Coming of the Night," is available at A Different Light in West Hollywood. For more info on John Rechy - visit his website at [www.john-rechy.com](http://www.john-rechy.com).

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