

Chicago Tribune April, 1997

## **PURPLE AMERICA**

By Rick Moody

Little, Brown. 304 pp.

Rick Moody's extraordinary third novel covers just one fateful day in the lives of the troubled Raitliffe family, yet seldom since Herman Broch's *Death of Virgil* has an author crowded so much substance into 24 hours.

Billie Raitliffe, 70, has spent two decades in her opulent Connecticut home wasting away to a neurological disease. She has lost her eyesight, her speech, her muscular functions and finally her will to live. And now, even her second husband, Lou Sloane, has left her.

Lou's desertion, announced in the apparently heartless form of a note typed on her computer, has summoned Billie's only son, aptly named Hex, from his foundering Manhattan job as a freelance publicist. But as the alcoholic, stuttering 38 year-old ne'er-do-well begins ministering to his helpless mother, we quickly see he cannot care even for himself.

This grim trio--a hopelessly ill woman wishing only to die, the husband who has deserted her, and the son mired in fecklessness--offer slender ground on which to build attachment in a reader. Therein lies one facet of Moody's genius. Working against the grain of their slight potential, he renders each character so empathetically that soon each is gripped tight within our sympathy.

The Pushcart Prize-winning Moody, 36, who declares his greatest interest lies in "interior states," summons our compassion by braiding stream-of-consciousness passages by each character.

Because we see Hex's life with Hex's eyes, we do not judge his rapid fluctuations between concern for his mother and resentment. We do not judge him when he takes her to a local restaurant and becomes distracted at the sight of Jane Ingersoll, for whom he has pined since ninth grade. On the contrary, as the jaded but benevolent Jane, now the single mother of two sons, once vibrant but now only "comfortable and sad," helps Hex attend his incontinent mother in the ladies' room, the impromptu tryst becomes perversely romantic: "Romance," Jane muses, "is bad interior lighting, convenience stores, bowling on league nights, seaside towns in winter, empty main streets. Romance is in the hearts of people who have given up on romance."

Through Billie's failing eyes we see the burden her life has become. Unable to bathe or use the bathroom alone, isolate, she asks her son to help her die. Only death can afford a dignified end to her perpetual anguish and humiliation.

Lou Sloane, the wife deserter, ironically becomes most sympathetic of all, as in his viewpoint we see the dwindling gifts reserved for age. His desertion, we learn, has come after 15 years of devoted care when he forced himself to accept that Billie had given up. And it came the day Lou lost his management job at a deteriorating nuclear power plant in the wake of potentially catastrophic radioactive leak, an event tying several plot strands together.

It ties Lou to Billie's first husband, Allen, in two ways. Like Allen, Lou has abandoned Billie. And like Lou, Allen had an ominous connection to nuclear power, taking part in post-W.W.II A-bomb tests which, Moody suggests, may have led to Allen's premature death. Now Lou, too old to restart his career, has taken the fall for a mishap that could render the Connecticut coast and groundwater fatal.

As various types of terrifying death weave through the richly textured narrative, *Purple America* grows to savor of a *Gatsby* two generations later. As in *Gatsby*, its characters are Midwesterners who've come back east, hopefully building their fortunes on ground that turns illusory. Allen even tried to deny his origins, nurturing "the idea that he was a Yankee, that his roots were entwined with the origins of the nation." But at the end of the 20th Century the East's pipes and walls, in buildings and in bodies, decay and crumble.

At a basic level this is also a love story, or rather a heartbreaking inquiry into how much damage love can sustain and still survive. Moody constantly tests words Shakespeare wrote at about his age, asking if love can still be love if it alters when it alteration finds.

Risking a blasphemous stretch, readers may also sense Moody's kinship to the young bard in his exuberance at the possibilities of language. Self-consciously artful but rarely obtrusive, Moody's prose dazzles with labyrinthine sentences of Faulknerian length. Its opening passage rings with biblical cadences, in the middle of which he tosses a zen koan, all describing Hex giving his mother a bath. So rich, in fact, is this book that it demands to be read at least twice.

With that uncertainty common to artists possessing a high internal standard of greatness, Moody recently confessed in *Publishers Weekly*, "I'm so plagued by doubt that I wake nights, afraid that I'm a total fraud." You can go back to sleep, Rick Moody. *Purple America* leaves no doubt you are the genuine article.