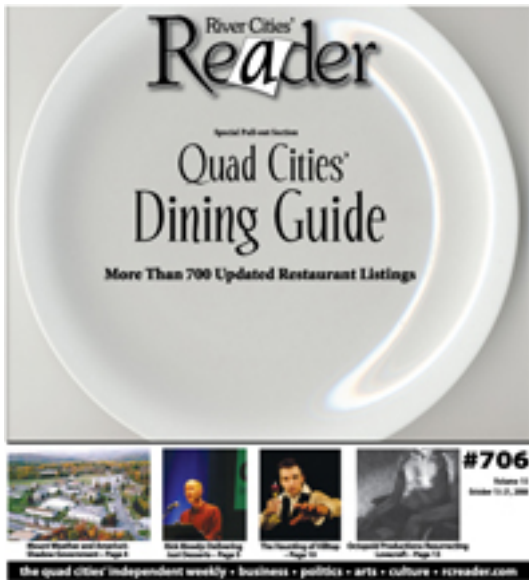


Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 15 October 2008 02:27



In April, Rick Moody fulfilled a fantasy that many artists surely have: He delivered a pie to the face of one of his critics.

Moody, who will be reading at Augustana College next week, is probably best known as the author of the 1994 novel from which director Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* was adapted. But he's also famous in some circles for nine words written

about

him: "Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation."

Those words were the opening line by Dale Peck in a 2002 *New Republic* review of Moody's award-winning memoir

The Black Veil

. Moody is hardly Peck's only vaunted victim; his reviews were collected in the aptly titled

Hatchet Jobs

, and he's similarly disemboweled Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and Julian Barnes. But that line is so forceful and unequivocal and personal that the two authors have been inextricably linked in the six years since.

Moody said in a phone interview this week that he hoped the pie would bring some closure.

"I got so tired of hearing about this," he said. "It seemed as though the

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remark launched a specific conversation about how the literary world deals with itself. That's an interesting question, but I was never allowed to really talk about that, because people just wanted a salacious answer to the question: 'What does it feel like to have this sentence written about you?' That's actually a tedious question. ... So when this guy asked me for charity if I would throw this pie at Dale, I guess I felt like I could put the first part to bed."

Moody, the author of four novels, a memoir, and three collections of short fiction - including the three novellas of last year's *Right Livelihoods* - said his career hasn't been the same since Peck's infamous review (Powells.com/review/2002_07_04.html).

"Try publishing books after something like that's been said about you," he said when I asked whether the notoriety was in some way a blessing. "It's like I was a dead person after that. ... It's like he came into my house, lobbed a bomb in there, and the body parts were scattered for miles. And the people who liked the work said, 'That was a really interesting writer. It's really too bad that he's dead.' And everybody else said, 'I hated the guy's work. I'm glad he's dead.' But the one thing they all agreed on was that he was dead. That's what it was like.

"My publishers have been really generous and responsible and have stuck with me for the long haul," he added. "But no, it hasn't been as easy as it was before then."

It should go without saying that Peck's review was unfair. Moody won the Pushcart Press Editor's Choice Award (for his debut novel *Garden State*), the PEN/Martha Albrand Prize (for the object of Peck's scorn), and a Guggenheim fellowship.

His most recent novel, *The Diviners* - about a proposed television miniseries whose script does not exist - received nearly as many negative reviews as positive ones, but the *Washington Post* was among the enthusiastic: "If you prefer a more straightforward narrative, this might not be the book for you, but if you like watching the smartest kid in the room do his stuff, *The Diviners* is like a Broadway musical filled with nothing but showstoppers, as Moody performs one bravura set piece after another."

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The author said that he's nearly finished a 900-page first draft of his next novel.



"I'm often superstitious about giving too much away when it's not done," he said, "but I'll say that it's sort of a slightly comical, slightly apocalyptic shaggy-dog story set in 2026 at the end of American economic dominance. ... It fuses the comic energy of the last big novel, *The Diviners*, with the mild futurism of *The Albertine Notes* in *Right Livelihoods*."

The inspiration, he said, was *The Crawling Hand*, "an incredibly bad horror film from the early '60s ... It's a classic of truly execrable drive-in movie fare" that includes a rubber hand that the actors must pretend is attacking them. "I felt like I wanted to make a contribution to that genre."

Moody's interest in writing genre fiction was sparked by Dave Eggers and Michael Chabon, who encouraged fellow authors to write something that straddled the perceived gulf between "real" literature and beach reading. Moody's *The Albertine Notes* - about a drug that gives one "perfect access to your memories," he said - was initially published in *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, and was included in *Year's Best Science Fiction 9*.

"There's a lot of freedom associated with re-making the genre according to my own

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needs," Moody said. "I didn't try to make it easy reading. That story ... is just as complicated and strange as some of my 'regular fiction' is."

Right Livelihoods also includes *The Omega Force*, written in memory of longtime *Paris Review*

editor George Plimpton. "I tried to make a piece that was reminiscent of what George liked ... to publish when he was still editing the magazine," Moody said.

The story, which will surely remind many people of John Cheever's "The Swimmer," concerns an alcoholic, retired bureaucrat who pieces together dubious clues in an effort to thwart a terrorist attack.

The source, Moody said, was a rumor going around Fishers Island, New York, where he writes. "I had heard when I was there one summer a few years ago this preposterous tale that there'd been a little plane that had landed on the tiny little one-runway airstrip on Fishers Island that somebody had seen, and that so-called 'dark-complected people' got off the plane. The center of the story is basically a true rumor that was passing around Fishers Island - this idea that the next assault on New York City by Middle Eastern terrorists was going to begin on this tiny place that you can't even find it on a map when you know it's there."

K&K, the middle novella in *Right Livelihoods*, involves some increasingly hostile messages put into a suggestion box at an insurance-sales company. One reads: "All of you should be lined up and shot."

The arc of the story is nearly inevitable, as the office manager tries to figure out who is writing these "suggestions," but Moody has a surprise in store, casting aside the central mystery and instead focusing on a minor human moment of empathy.

"I knew the ending, too, and the problem was how to make ... the obviousness of it contribute rather than subtract from the story as a whole," Moody said. "That last scene was just the attempt to make this ending happen in an epiphanic or a revelatory kind of context for the character. A story is only interesting finally if somebody in the story is living through a highly dramatic moment in their life. A very unusual moment. A moment when they might expect to have a shock of recognition. ...

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"That was the hardest story in that collection to write. ... Because the language is so clear - which is not my normal way of approaching things - I really felt like the ending was a little bit difficult. ... It was really hard to come by. ... I was still messing with the last few pages of *K&K* at 3 p.m. on the last day where if I didn't turn it in we were going to lose pub[lication] date."



I asked whether he was happy with the ending. "No," he said. "Too easy."

Moody has said that he starts with a character and lets the story reveal itself as he's writing. "What I really try not to do in my work anyway is to over-plot, because I feel that stories that have plot first and characters subordinate thereto are stories that feel manipulative to me and inorganic in some way," he said. "The stories are never plotted, so there's never a moment where the plot is revealed to me. ... The revision process has to be the time when you try and figure out: What are the operating conflicts in the piece that need to be resolved through story, and how can you refine and cut away so that those operating conflicts emerge and are easily apprehensible by the reader?"

In his first few books, Moody's writing was restrained, but that gave way to what one critic called "maximalist prose." The author said he's retreating - a little. "I think it's maybe going in a new direction even now," he said. "From *The Diviners* onward there's been a sort of movement 20 percent back in the direction of storytelling and allowing

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the story to be central to the task, instead of feeling a responsibility to always gussy up the surface of the prose. That's maybe a middle-aged man's approach to things. I no longer feel like I necessarily want to dazzle, or that I have to try to prove that I'm the most cerebral guy in the room - which probably I never was anyway. So now I can kind of relax a little and let things happen somewhat."

Moody said that he might read from his novel-in-progress at Augustana, along with short stories.

"The opportunity for me is this: When I hear a writer read, I often then can go back to their work with a real sense of how the rhythms fall in the paragraphs, and I can really hear the writer's voice," he said. "When I read [for an audience] ... I can make a case for the way the prose works just by being there and using *my* voice on *my* lines. ... There's this chance to show them how the prose works."

And while Moody sounded slightly irritated to be asked about Peck, he did get the opportunity to address the issues raised by that review.

"There's a certain kind of reviewing that seems to indicate that the writers in America would be happier to tear one another to shreds than to argue for the importance of their medium in a cultural context that includes *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars* and Gawker.com ... ," he said. "It's like the culture would be really happy for us to eliminate ourselves from the broader intellectual debate so that this other, essentially corporate, nonsense can have the ascendancy in the culture as a whole."

(Speaking of Gawker.com, you can see Moody pie Peck at Gawker.com/385919/rick-moody-pies-dale-peck.)

And on an individual level, Moody said, he's accepted that his career changed because of Peck: "I learned from the process. I really did. And that's what I told Dale before I mashed the pie in his face."

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Rick Moody will read from his work at 7 p.m. on Thursday, October 23, in Augustana College's Wallenberg Hall, inside Denkmann Memorial Hall at 3520 Seventh Avenue in Rock Island.