

Robert coover
"pricksongs and
descants" essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Julia Van Middlesworth Annotation: Robert Coover " Prick songs & Descants"

To read Pricksongs & Descants is to travel through the dark myths of childhood—not the scrubbed down Disney " rip-off" versions—but the Brother's Grimm with a Robert Coover triple twist of sex, death and terror. " The Gingerbread House," is transformed into a journey of sexual discovery. In " A Winter's Scene" the camera lens focuses tightly, then pulls back for the depth of field shot. The reader watches as the latent image, black and white, floats to the surface and with it a sense of doom and foreboding.

In " The Baby Sitter" we take a funhouse spin through the suburbs where anything and everything and nothing happens. The reader new to metafiction, as I am, is perplexed at times, but engaged. Disoriented at first, but grounded by the rich tapestry of his sentences and the vibrant imagery that he assembles in collage-like sequences. There is terror here for sure—this is Cooverville, but who doesn't like the flapping of black rags? We are curious. " The Gingerbread House". This is the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel re-spun with the threads and rags showing.

No, the witch doesn't roast slowly in the oven in this retelling. Coover uses sensory detail and repetition to set the mood of " The Gingerbread House". It opens with the young boy and girl entering the forest where " earthly greens seep into the darkening distance. " The verb " seep" that Coover has chosen does a lot of work for him. Consciously or unconsciously, the reader senses danger ahead. The " earthly greens" don't sprout, waver or beckon, they " seep" which gives the palpable sensation of the forest encroaching. The word " seep" suggests water, rising water, algae filled water, decay.

And this word appears again in passage 23. " Shapes seem to twist and coil, and vapors seep up from the forest floor. " The vapors seep up as does the floor of the forest and nature will have its way. Coover also uses light and dark to shade and evoke emotion and mood. We skip into the shadow then into the light. The sunlight is " filtered" and also vaporous and the reader has a sensory perception of a mist floating in the air, as if looking through a curtain—we see but not clearly, it's all a bit gauzy. And in this diaphanous atmosphere they sing, " Their song tells of God's care for the little ones. Here, Coover uses the weight of words to stop us. There is something discordant behind the words. We know that the darkness ahead will tell a different story. And we know that the song they sing is but a myth with all the tatters showing. As the reader follows the path, Coover uses vibrant colors as a painter dabs a bit of scarlet here, and yes, a splotch of purple beside it. " Spots of red, violet, pale blue, gold, burnt orange," the pattern falls as notes, clipped and in succession. They seem to vibrate against one another. There is the jolt of red and the violet with a timbre of violence.

The " pale blue" and " gold" bring a rest and suggest the highly idealized illustrations of Jesus with the pale blue and the gold light emanating from his spirit. Finally, the shock of " burnt orange" which brings the sentence to a fiery end. And later in passage 29, we have, " The good fairy has sparkling blue eyes and golden hair". When the witch appears she is in black rags that flap in the wind. The witch represents life and death. The good fairy is myth. Coover uses the symbolic power of color throughout to add texture and latent meaning.

By section 11, the dove appears in a beautiful description. " The dove is a soft lustrous white, head high, breast filled, tip of tail less than a feathers thickness off the ground. " And at the end of section 11 I love the way he ends with: " Only its small beak moves. Around a bread crumb. " (Pg. 65) I love the rhythm of these two sentences and the way the second comes to a stop and adds a sort of an inside joke. We all know the birds in the original " Hansel and Gretel" eat the breadcrumbs and it also adds a sense of the dread to come. The dove figures prominently.

It is a symbol of innocence and spirit, Christ, but here Coover's witch rips out the heart of the dove and in doing so turns the myth inside out. " She holds before him the burnished cherry-red heart of a dove. The boy licks his lips. She steps back. The glowing heart pulses gently, evenly, excitingly. " (Pg. 71) Coover uses the dove as a traditional and familiar, even cliché metaphor for innocence but then he tears it apart and adds a twist of sexuality, the boy licks his lips, the glowing heart pulses as does the sentence. Even the form of the text services the story.

We move from section to section, stone to stone, stepping along the path, from sunlight to darkness, gum drops and peppermint sticks to the witch who looks like a heap of black rags. And when we reach the end of the story, the ruby red door, the heart, and look back at the first seven sentences we see Coover has set us up perfectly. From the first section he has introduced the major themes of myth, innocence, knowledge, discovery, and the oncoming darkness that is death itself. In the final section 42: " Yes, marvelous! Delicious! Insuperable!

But beyond: what is the sound of black rags flapping? " (Pg. 75) . " The Babysitter" This is the story of the fairy tale known as suburbia, and the anesthetized characters that inhabit it. In their boredom, everyone, the children, the husband, the two teenage boys, want to sexually devour the babysitter. The husband, Mr. Tucker is looking to his sexual past and lost youth, the teenage boys, looking toward their sexual future, and the children are on the brink of sexuality. In fact the boy, Jimmy is entering the brink while the girl Bitsy expresses sexuality through physical play.

But even though in this third person narrative that head hops from character to character, shifting point of view, I think the main character here is the television and the suburban myth itself. It's not the " happy ending" we heard about as children in the fairy tale of life after marriage. Again, as in " The Gingerbread House" the placement of the text enhances the story. It's broken into sections that reflect the channel changer. And like the television dial of the 50's or 60's or the remote of today, the sections jump as station to station, we see the story through the babysitter, then the teenage boys, Mr.

Tucker, His wife, the little boy and girl, in a pattern that mirrors the constantly changing channel by the babysitter. As the story progresses Coover uses repetitive imagery with escalating outcomes, steadily plotting toward a melodramatic ending as the television plays out a similar scenario on the screen. I thought about this jumping back and forth, trying out different outcomes and it reminds me of the way people, especially ones who are bored, in the suburbs say, think. You drive the car and imagine yourself

in an accident with ambulance lights flashing. Maybe there are human limbs mixed with groceries on the highway.

Or you have a crush on the gas station attendant or the dentist and you think up different scenarios and actions where you end up having sex. I wonder if Coover meant to reflect patterns of thought? I really liked the way Coover used the pinball machine as a metaphor for sex as in the following sentence: " Well, man, I say we just go rape her," Mark says flatly, and swings his weight against the pinball machine. " (Pg. 219) Then: " Get in there, you mother! " (pg. 219) " Man I'm gonna turn this baby over! " When we get into Mr. Tucker's head its kind of funny but startling in the way it dehumanizes the babysitter.

With the exception of Mrs. Tucker all the male characters, little Jimmy, Mark and Jack, and Mr. Tucker see her as succulent young flesh. But then maybe that is the point? Perhaps Coover is also demystifying the whole idea of " romantic sex". He strips it down to the primal. Mr. Tucker imagines, he is peeking into the bathroom window and the babysitter emerges from the tub wrapped in a towel. The towel slips as she hurries to answer the phone. " She's got a sweet ass. Standing there in the bushes, pawing himself with one hand, he lifts his glass with the other and toasts her sweet ass, which his son now swats.

Haw haw, maybe that boy's gonna shape up, after all. " (Pg. 227) It's as if the window where a television and he's just watching the show! I also love the way Coover plays with the dark stranger on the television and how he uses body language to illustrate that the babysitter reacts physically to the

drama. Her senses are heightened. She is sexually turned on. "The dark one hurls himself forward, drives his shoulder into the sheriff's hard midriff, her own tummy tightens..." Then a few sentences later: "...a pistol! The dark one has a pistol!" "She clutches her hands between her thighs—no! he sheriff spins! Wounded the dark man hesitates, aims, her legs stiffen toward the set..." Then: "His pistol dropping in his collapsing hand..." And then out of nowhere the babysitter exclaims: "Oh to be whole! to be good and strong and right! to embrace and be embraced by wholeness!" (Pg. 214) I find that sentence interesting. Not only does it surprise, it makes me wonder if Coover is stating the typical American set of "values" that suburbia aspires to as sexuality and violence simmer below the perfectly paved sidewalks. Which brings me to Mrs. Tucker and her girdle.

After a visit to the powder room, Mrs. Tucker can't get her girdle back up and all the guests at the party join in and butter the girdle and Mrs. Tucker trying to pull it back on as she rolls on the floor. Then it turns into a game show. "The Game of the night is Get Dolly Tucker Back in Her Girdle Again." Then: "Several of them are stretching the girdle, while others try to jam the fat inside. I think we made a couple of inches on this side! Roll her over!" (Pg. 232) Again, Coover alludes to the television and the game shows that were popular at the time. Now we have reality shows too.

Not only is it hilarious, it's more than that. Dolly has been thinking about her life. She's overweight and so is her husband but that's okay. He puts her down for her weight and her looks in front of the hosts of the party. He humiliates her. The life she imagined, the myth, did not come true and she struggles as with the girdle to "fit in" to this life in the suburbs with the

bratty kids and the neat house and new color television that she wished for. So, Coover's prose works on different levels: the social commentary as a whole and the disillusionment of Mrs.

Tucker with an added twist of comedy. In the end we end up with the babysitter murdering the children, the teenage boys murdering the babysitter, they're in the bathtub, out of the bathtub, and end up on the news as Mr. and Mrs. Tucker watch from the neighbor's house. And what do they do? They change the station. Everything has happened. Nothing has happened. I didn't even get to the bathtub yet and its significance as a symbol in the story. I can only come up with the fact that washing makes people feel clean. It's sensuous to soak in a tub.

You're naked. The babysitter is trying out the Tucker's tub as a way of trying out their life? There is so much to ponder with Coover. Reading Coover was a revelation for me. I've never read metafiction before. At first it was disorienting and frankly I dreaded writing about it. But as I read more deeply I ended up loving the stories with few exceptions. What really stopped me in my tracks though is Coover's language, the way he puts certain sentences together and creates indelible images with focus and detail and the preciseness of his words.