



# **A Night at the Movies, Or, You Must Remember This: Fictions**

*Robert Coover*

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## **A Night at the Movies, Or, You Must Remember This: Fictions** Robert Coover

A new collection of interlocking short fictions that pay an irreverent and entertaining fictional tribute to Hollywood myths, from the acclaimed author of *The Public Burning* and *Gerald's Party*.

### **A Night at the Movies, Or, You Must Remember This: Fictions Details**

Date : Published March 1st 1987 by Simon & Schuster (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780671617967

Author : Robert Coover

Format : Hardcover 187 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Literature, Fantasy, Contemporary, Culture, Film



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**Robert Coover**

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## From Reader Review A Night at the Movies, Or, You Must Remember This: Fictions for online ebook

### Melanie says

Oh, this collection is delightful! It's structured like a night (or, more aptly, a whole glorious day) at the movies, complete with features, short subjects, and an intermission. Coover moves gracefully through, between, and around genres; he also uses the language and logic of dreams to capture the feeling of being deep within a movie and within the culture of the cinema. Stories like "Charlie in the House of Rue" and "You Must Remember This" seem to exist in the spaces between frames--familiar characters performing on the borders of familiar stories in startling, anarchic ways. It's a fun and strange collection, and total giddy bliss for film nerds.

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### Geoff says

*"It's like watching the pictures and being in them at the same time, as though one might be able somehow to eat the world with one's eyes, if that's not too idiotic."*

Well this was pretty much insane, in a very good way. Coover takes the tropes, cliches, stereotypes, slang, conceits, customs and conventions of the world of movies and the movie theater and amps them up, blows them out, writes them into an übersurrealnonstoptrainofimagemotiondreamfilm-prose in these connected short pieces that, while being all outrageous and sexed up and fantastic and hypermanic still manage to balance something metaphysical and at times wistful into the whole weave of this work, an ode to and an aching for the bliss and comfort that only high artifice can bring. I for one consider certain movie theaters to be holy places, so "Phantom of The Movie Palace" was a masterpiece to me, as I've dreamt similar dreams. For the price of admission you get Westerns and Musicals and an art film and Charlie Chaplin (somehow eliciting the most touching moments of this book while dangling from the rotting, strung-up corpse of a starlet), a genuine batshit crazy intermission, a stopover at a train station ("Milford Junction, 1939: A Brief Encounter" perfectly sums up the way time slips when a movie starts and the pinch of melancholia that hits as you ease out after the credits roll and real life grudgingly encroaches) and, yep, a pornographic retelling of Casablanca! More than a dark satire of all things filmic, this gets to the heart of our obsession with and need for illusion as a respite from reality (thus it is a love letter to fiction in all its forms), and our inescapable immersion in "that great stream of image-activity that characterizes the mortal condition..."

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### R. says

The Charlie Chaplin story sounds like its worth the *price of admission*.

Not the Vincent Price of Admission which is your *mortal soul, frog!* Wait. Did V.P. try to steal Kermit's soul? No. That was Alice Cooper. And he bought Gonzo's. Alice Cooper, Robert Coover. Alice Coover, June Cleaver, John Cheever. June, John. John, Alice. Alice, June. Robert, John. Vincent! Vincent, you already know Alice. June, this is Vincent. Vincent, John and Robert. Oh, all those holiday party introductions.

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## **Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

### **FROM THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR:**

**Warning: These Movies Have Not Been Approved for Adult Audiences (Potentially Illegal, Immoral or Infringing)**

#### **Inside the Oval Orifice (You Must Remember This)**

Agent one uses an axe to cut his way through the front door and get into the lobby. Agent two rushes into the office, where he is hiding behind the gold curtains. It's easy to find him, because his shoes are pointing out beneath the curtains. "This is outrageous," he says, like so many of his helpless victims before him. Like them, he surrenders without a struggle. Like them, there is nothing he can do.

Agent two leads him out into the lobby where agent one is waiting, having cleaned up the splinters and chips from the axed door. He hadn't wanted to be present if there was a gunfight in the office.

"What was it like in there?" Agent one asks agent two. "It's a disaster area. Another fine mess," Agent two responds.

They take him outside, where a stage has been quickly assembled behind the police barricades. A crowd has already gathered. "The public is never wrong!" They scream. "Let the revels begin!" And they do.

Agent two offers him a hood, but he declines. He wants the television footage to show him in his full glory, with no room for ambiguity about his identity. The executioner, on the other hand, takes advantage of his right to a hood, as he has done numerous times before. He is proficient in all aspects of his duties.

Agent two forces him to kneel and places his head firmly on the wooden scaffold.

He protests, "There's been some mistake, surely."

A stenographer is standing nearby (he wonders whether he recognises her from a late season of his incredibly successful reality tv show; perhaps he should have kept his hand in his pocket). She responds: "It's all in your mind, so we're cutting your head off."

"What?" He cries, but she is already gone, always a bit player, never a star.

The executioner, who is wired for sound, says, "And now for the main feature."

He doesn't have to wait long. The crowd starts a countdown from ten, but before it is even finished, the guillotine blade descends with a clunk and a tinkle. His head plops neatly into the basket. The crowd roars its approval. From the basket somewhere, somehow comes the words, "I will make America great again. Very, very great. Believe me! I promise."

#### **How to Spend One Night in Casablanca: "My Other Mouth Wants to Luff You, Too" (You Mustn't Remember This)**

It is dark in Rick's apartment. It's so hot he's left the windows open. The fans are turning at full speed. There is still no relief. He feels like his chest is about to explode. Maybe he should take Sam's advice and see the doctor (who after all is a regular customer, as is everyone of means in Casablanca). He hears the sound of liquor pouring into a glass. Is he dreaming? He smells orange zest. Is it Grand Marnier? He realises he has woken with an erection. The weight moves from his chest. Maybe he doesn't have to worry about the doctor after all. An ice-cold, liquid, orange-scented opening descends along his penis. The lips appear to part and what seems like half a glass of liqueur showers over his genitals and pubic hair. He reaches over and turns on his bedside lamp. His gaze locates a perfectly formed vulva right in front of his face and two thighs either side of his chest. They look familiar, but he can't quite name the person to whom they belong. "Rick?" He recognises the Scandinavian accent immediately. "Yes..Ilsa?" She sobs out, "Say it once, Rick...say it for old time's sake." He wonders whether this is about the letters of transit and is just about to deny Ilsa's request, when she leans back and sits on his face. When she rises again, she repeats, "Say it, Rick". His gaze returns to what, later, Lacan would think of as "l'origine du monde". He hesitates, then he recites the words like an actor, "Here's looking at you kid." Ilse sits back on his face and says, "Thank you, Rick...You can take another photo, if you want to."

*Rick and Ilsa*

## **BEHIND THE TWO STARS:**

### **Belittled Legends**

James Joyce shoehorned Leopold Bloom's story into mythology as related by Homer. It seems that Robert Coover wanted to do the next best thing: to co-opt contemporary cinematic legends (actors and films) for the purposes of giving vent to his puerile sense of humour.

He traverses and travesties the whole gamut of the Hollywood film industry from A listers (including Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman) to B movies, from corn to porn, only each story oscillates uncomfortably between juvenilia and senilia.

This collection pales beside Michael Chabon's more deferential (and better-written) ode to comics, "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay".

### **A Lot Like Stupidity**

A projectionist or a buff knows enough about film to internalise a whole diverse world of the imagination. Coover knows that this world is not necessarily ordered, in fact it's chaotic, at least as he projects it in "*The Phantom of the Movie Palace*" and "*Intermission*". Both stories read like out-takes from "*The Public Burning*". Without the benefit of the context of that work, it's hard to tell whether the writing is deliberately bad or just unintentionally terrible:

*"He'll run a hero through all the episodes of a serial at once, letting him be burned, blasted, buried, drowned, shot, run down, hung up, splashed with acid or sliced in two, all at the same time, or he'll select a favourite ingenue and assault her with a thick impasto of pirates, sailors, bandits, gypsies, mummies, Nazis, vampires, Martians, and college boys, until the terrified expressions on their respective faces pale to a kind of blurred, mystical affirmation of the universe. Which, not unexpectedly, looks a lot like stupidity."* (p22)

*“He too feels suddenly like he’s caught out in no-man’s land on a high trapeze with pie on his face, but he can’t stop. It’s too much fun. Or something like fun.”* (p23)

Or something not like fun at all!

*“As he stands there on the damp shabby waterfront in the shadow of a silent boom, watching the night fog coil in around the tugboats and barges like erotic ribbons of dream, the detective seems to see or want to see tall ghostly galleons drift in, with one-eyed pirates hanging motionless from the yardarms like pale Christmas tree decorations, and he is stabbed by a longing for danger and adventure...even as he is overswept by a paralysing fear of the unknown.”* (p34)

### **Nothing Novel**

One of the loud-mouthed Cooverati has declared that this collection of stories is in fact a novel. I wonder whether that would have disentitled it to the Rea Award for the Short Story in 1987?

My preference is to let the author define the category into which their work falls: the cover of my copy shows that either Coover or his publishers regarded it as “*fictions*” (plural) (in the vein of Jorge Luis Borges’ “*ficciones*”). What’s the point of a reader/fanboy trying to categorise it differently? Hubris? The purpose of the king-maker is always to aggrandise the king-maker rather than the king.

### **The Terrible Disenchantment of Discontinuity**

The cinematic theme is reinforced by the program (i. e., table of contents) for this supposedly nice night’s entertainment. However, it’s not unusual for a collection to share a theme, even if there is no continuity of narrative or characters. Apart from the two stories already mentioned, each story is told in quite a different style. The program emphasises not just their links, but their separateness. To paraphrase Coover, it never “*comes together for a moment in one conceptual and aesthetic whole*” (p17). We are never “*caught up in some terrible enchantment of continuity*” (p 18).

### **Wishing and Hoping**

Forewarned, I kept reading only in the hope that it might get better:

*“Tell me, lard-ass, did you ever have the feeling that you wanted to go, and still have the feeling that you wanted to stay?”* (p21)

### **Giggles and Snickers**

“*The Phantom of the Movie Palace*” presents as an unedited montage. These words and images seem to have been assembled for the sole reason that there is space available for them. The reader is fortunate Coover didn’t set out to fill a thousand maximalist pages. The quantity would not have enhanced the quality. The author seems to revel in its badness and the giggles and snickers it evokes in some sections of the auditorium.

Several of the stories come across as literal descriptions of slapstick or cartoonish action on the screen. There are lots of commas and lists, all to no end or avail:

*“Charlie hurls the broom over his left shoulder into the dish cupboards, grabs up the soup bowl, lurches*

*drunkenly to the fireplace, throws the contents into the fire, ladles out another bowlful from the kettle, pouring hot soup down his pant leg in haste, hops back anxiously on one foot, trips and falls, spilling the soup, scrambles to his feet and rushes back to the kettle, refills the bowl, returns cautiously, bowl shaking in his hands, spills it in the fat man's lap, dashes back to the kettle, beginning to delight now in all this too-ing and fro-ing, returns to spill soup all over the table, hoppety-hops back giddily for another bowlful, hardly pausing at the kettle, dances to the table and pours the soup on the man's head.” (p96)*

Even if that was a transcription of an actual Charlie Chaplin scene, it highlights that some things are better left unsaid. It must have been a sight gag.

You have to question the amount of time and intelligence that was wasted on writing and reading this sentence. This is literature imitating kitsch und schlock (or literature conceived as kitsch und schlock).

The risk with parody is that the product is often worse than the target.

### **Pricks and Pants Adroop**

Coover continually mentions skirts, blouses, underpants, brassieres, breasts and nipples as if he is a schoolboy who has just discovered their existence on the clothesline or girl next door. It's hard to work out the intended audience for this prurient faux-cartoonism (or perhaps it's not):

*“These breasts are nearly as large as the woman herself, and they have nipples on them that turn sequentially into pursed lips, dripping spigos, traffic lights, beckoning fingers, then lit-up pinball bumpers. She takes her breasts off and gives them to the real policeman...” (p136)*

*“He clings to her, pants adroop, tears in his eyes, shadows creeping over his face like bruises, gazing out into the encircling gloom with a look of anguish and bewilderment, as though to ask: What kind of place is this? Who took the light away? And why is everybody laughing?” (p111)*

The last question crossed my mind as well, though no answer followed in its wake. Then I remembered canned laughter.

### **Emptied of Realness**

Much Post-Modernism can be critiqued simply by quoting it. To paraphrase Coover again, he “empties [this collection] of its own realness.” (p136) The book is neither real nor fantastic. It's just really mediocre.

Coover's writing grates after a while, so that I continued reading, “more out of respect than appetite.” (p137) Previously, “I had to admit there was something attractive about him, in spite of his being a wanker and a loony.” (p152) What now? Maybe the joke was on me the reader? And therefore on us readers?

### **SOUNDTRACK:**

#### **Soft Cell - "Say Hello, Wave Goodbye"**

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=5AIYYjY...>

January 30, 2017

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## **Gabriel says**

Should I write that the title story's pretty smutty? Or can you just guess that from the name on the cover? How about that that same story is also pretty great (though, yeah, again, that name on the cover), not because of the smuttiness, but because of the melancholia that is always its wake, that desiccating House of Rue just beyond the pleasures of the local Palace? By that part of the program, of course, Coover's patrons are shuffling out of the theater, the only smacking sounds their shoes freeing themselves from pleasures past—when the lights go up in the house, they go down on the screen. But, damn. What an ending.

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## **Mala says**

Remember those times when going to a movie was an occasion worth anticipating & dressing up for? First day, first show & if you happened to have access to a premiere - wow! that would be cinematic nirvana. Remember when cinema halls were grand affairs - a foyer with a fountain & a huge chandelier, marble staircase, red velvet curtains...Hard to conjure that scenario in these times of multiplexes, drive-ins, Netflix, movie-on-demand & so on.

But the sad emptiness of a magnificent cinema hall could be a comment on the times of VHS & DVDs when movies lost their magic to other small attractions & somehow our lives & imagination also became confined in that narrow space.

Movies provide the myths for our modern times, and Coover, a fabulist and a myth-buster par excellence; has attempted to explore, explode, & create anew familiar film narratives on these pages. *A Night at the Movies* was the 1987 winner of the Rea Award, the highest literary award for short fiction in America.

The first thing that leaps out at a reader is the structure of the book - a marathon movie session, divided into sections like coming attractions, features, shorts, intermission, and spread across various genres etc.(view spoiler)

**"Just as painting was enriched by its supposed enemy, photography, so literature is profiting from contact with the movies\*."**

The evening's attractions begin with the absolutely crazy *The Phantom of the Movie Place* – it reminded me of Cinema Paradiso where the cinema hall became a sanctuary for the young protagonist, & the movie projectionist, his mentor. I wonder if Coover's work had inspired this movie to some extent but here the focus is on the subversion of the cinema hall as a place of terror more in The Phantom of the Opera mould. Hard to tell really as it references so many (real? fictive?) movies.

Here a projectionist in an empty movie theatre tries to keep things running to give himself the illusion of its viability only to lose his mind in a bizarre, surrealistic scenario where the projected phantoms run amok. The tension is so tightly wound that the first short feature, *After Lazarus* comes as a relief but lest we are lulled into a false sense of security, the camera work reminds one of earlier Dogme 95 movies! A mind-boggling, mind-numbing, puzzle of an art film/story of which Borges would've been proud. A self-multiplicating horror scenario that really knocked the socks off my feet!

Coover has not only employed cinematic language & techniques to his purpose, he has also taken the various genres & turned them upside down. By the time we come to the Western *Shoot out at Gentry's Junction*, it's obvious that Coover is subverting the genre with absurdities upon absurdities & having a ball with it. Maybe we shd also join in the fun but don't look for political correctness here—(view spoiler) In this area, Coover seems to belong right there with Barth. So you know what you are in for.

The mayhem/madness keeps getting a notch higher with each succeeding feature.

The superb *Charlie in the House of Rue* which blends a Chaplin comedy with Poe's classic horror, takes this splicing of genres to further heights of ghoulish delight!

Coover turns highly meta during *Intermission*, when an audience member has the experience of a life time beginning with a very clever nod to The Purple Rose of Cairo (Sidebar comment: do watch this heartbreakingly beautiful movie. Woody Allen has called it his favourite among his own films.), & then a pell-mell rushing into various plot types - kidnap drama, shark tale, savage tribal adventure, sheikh's harem & so on. It's like one of those themed montages that run on TCM - only longer & a lot more harrowing. And you thought Intermission was a time to rush to the refreshment area and/or visit the loo!

I know this review is getting long but bear with me a little longer please because Coover's take on Brief Encounter is such beautiful writing I got to share a quote: ( and yes it goes without saying watch that movie too if for nothing else than to get an idea of treatment of adultery in the movies of 1940s.) :

"the platforms already beginning to slide away into the night like the last of the rolling titles in a picture show at the Palladium, the shadowy figures on the platforms now little more than some nameless creatures who have no reality at all and who soon vanish altogether, the accelerating landscape, framed by the train window, gradually receding into a kind of distant panoramic backdrop for one's own dreams and memories, projected onto the strange blurry space in between, which is more or less where the window is, but is not the window itself, a rather peculiar space perhaps, somehow there and not there at the same time, but no less real, my dear, for all that and, at the very least, a fascinating place in which to lose oneself for just a little while, just a little while, on the way home to Churley or Ketchworth, until someone, meaning to be kind, gives you a shake and says, quite soberly and cruelly, "Wake up! We're here!" and (it's almost happening already) all those silly dreams disappear."

There's a Fred Astaire homage & finally, Coover takes on that holiest of holies—Casablanca & turns it into a

sexual farce of such proportions that it would send its loyal fanbase into hysterics - but did't I tell you about that PC thing before...?

In a way, the first feature is a clue to the subsequent mashing up of genres and Coover's treatment of his material.

What's remarkable is that Coover's style appropriates the language of cinema to such an extent that the book itself becomes a highly visual movie experience!

"Sometimes, when one picture does not seem enough, he projects two, three, even several at a time, creating his own split-screen effects, montages, superimpositions. Or he uses multiple projectors to produce a flow of improbable dissolves, startling sequences of abrupt cuts and freeze frames like the stopping of a heart, disturbing juxtapositions of slow and fast speeds, fades in and out like labored breathing. Sometimes he builds thick collages of crashing vehicles or mating lovers or gun-toting soldiers, cowboys, and gangsters all banging away in unison, until the effect is like time-lapse photography of passing clouds, waves washing the shore. (...) He recognizes in all these dislocations, of course, his lonely quest for the impossible mating, the crazy embrace of polarities, as though the distance between the terror and the comedy of the void were somehow erotic - it's a kind of pornography."

Verdict: Coover is not for the faint-hearted! But if you are the kind of reader who enjoys stylistic variety—experiments with both form & language, reshaping of familiar myths into something dark & disturbing, manic energy, crazy comic sense – and Porn - he'll be worth your time.

Cooverism: "People speak of the heart as the seat of love, but in his profession he knows better. It is a most dark and mysterious labyrinth, where cruelty, suspicion, depravity, lewdness lurk like shadowy fiends, love being merely one of their more ruthless and morbid disguises. To prowl these sewers of the heart is to crawl through hell itself." How refreshing! Write this in your Valentine card next month.

\* \* \*

Sharing here an article, which, coming from a distinguished filmmaker, really illustrates what Coover has done in this book:

"Whenever I hear people dismiss movies as "fantasy" and make a hard distinction between film and life, I think to myself that it's just a way of avoiding the power of cinema. Of course it's not life—it's the invocation of life, it's in an ongoing dialogue with life.

Frank Capra said, "Film is a disease." I caught the disease early on. I felt it whenever I walked up to the ticket booth with my mother or my father or my brother. You'd go through the doors, up the thick carpet, past the popcorn stand that had that wonderful smell—then to the ticket taker, and then in some of the old theaters there would be another set of doors with little windows and you'd get a glimpse of something magical happening up there on the screen, something special. And as we entered, for me it was like entering a sacred space, a kind of sanctuary where the living world around me seemed to be recreated and played out.

What was it about cinema? What was so special about it? I think I've discovered some of my own answers to that question a little bit at a time over the years.

First of all, there's light. (**No wonder, this book begins with the projectionist's tale!**)

Light is at the beginning of cinema, of course. It's fundamental—because cinema is created with light, and it's still best seen projected in dark rooms, where it's the only source of light. But light is also at the beginning of everything. Most creation myths start with darkness, and then the real beginning comes with

light—which means the creation of forms. Which leads to distinguishing one thing from another, and ourselves from the rest of the world. Recognizing patterns, similarities, differences, naming things—interpreting the world. Metaphors—seeing one thing “in light of” something else. Becoming “enlightened.” Light is at the core of who we are and how we understand ourselves.”

The Persisting Vision: Reading the Language of Cinema by Martin Scorsese:  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>

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\* NYT article  
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/09/14...>

### **Jason says**

Anybody paying even the scantest attention would be aware that I am leaning hard into a Coover completist kick this year. Now, for a long time I have seen what Coover does in the same way most people do: merry postmodern play of a metafictional / intertextual nature. Reading *A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES*, which is most of the time as seemingly playful and light-hearted as anything he has produced, it dawned on me that the word "play" might not be a strong enough for what I was encountering. It may also fail to account for real sense of intention being displayed. I suddenly had an interesting thought: perhaps we need to roll out militarist terminology and declare Coover's a literature of occupation. This book's fascination w/ cinema is a fascination with appropriating extant forms (and honest-to-goodness intellectual properties) and wresting from them real life-force. In no other book of Coover's have I ever felt anything like the sense that he was conducting war (though he may well have been). Here I could taste the fumes. This is the Coover that most invokes the Situationists and the concept of "détournement." The book begins by offering a program in place of a table of contents, and the first (and finest) piece brings us to a phantom movie palace lored over by a malevolent projectionist-cum-author-surrogate. This is a man not unafraid to project three movies at once and fracture reality w/ their interplay. (Buster in *SHERLOCK JR.*, anybody?) Again and again the book combusts and collides celluloid dream words (whose dreams aren't haunted by the cinema?). Radical splicing, destabilizing recombinations. Everything is engineered for maximal slippage. We get our high noon, our Chaplin-tramp in trouble, and even spend a night in Casablanca (and in doing so receive some juicy erotic fan fiction *avant la lettre*). Let's make no mistake: the movies in *A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES* are Hollywood movies. The big spectacles that have colonized the imaginations of the known world. It is precisely because Hollywood movies are big, beautiful colonizers that I had the ineluctable sense reading Coover's book that I was engaging w/ him in guerilla warfare. The psychoanalysts speak of the Law of the Father. We who are on the other side know one another when we see one another.

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### **Jenny Bohannon says**

I really couldn't get into these stories, maybe because I was reading this for school along with several other books for other classes, but this style of writing just didn't interest me. I get that it's satire, but the stories were too jumpy, some nonsensical, and parts vulgar. I couldn't wait to be done with it.

## Rob says

Around 1987, the concept of multimedia was more a case of rock stars like Bowie or Jagger appearing in films, or books with an audio CD shoehorned into the inside flap. We people back then only had 5 senses, 2 ears and 10 fingers. Here, from that year, we get an experimental novelist using the grammar of the Hollywood movie to drive a story collection.

The classic in this postmodern short story selection is the last piece (*You Must Remember This*), a lusty and sharply-written imagining of the missing scene between Rick and Ilsa in Casablanca (what do they do during that cut?) that dives equally into the erotic (the deeply erotic even), the philosophical and the in-joke, shredding the Production Code and adding more erotic allure to Ingrid Bergman than even her "fallen woman" status did when she shacked up with Roberto Rossellini. The idea of using the movies as a guiding theme is a winner: we've all got memories and personal investments to bring to the table that the author is setting for us.

So, does the rest of it work? As postmodernism gazes on culture as an old jalopy to be stripped for parts, indistinguishable from what others term "retromania" and still others consider "what they don't make them like anymore", we are left with the feeling that something familiar is but an entry point (a band we have heard of, a movie featuring a known face, a book at least championed by someone we are not unaware of, a friend of a friend of a friend) but that then they must take it somewhere or risk being branded a remake or a spoof. Robert Coover, critic's darling and multiple prize winner, probably doesn't set pulses racing at the Book of the Month club. But he is an excitable, passionate writer with a deft touch, cool "plotting" and - most importantly of all - an impish sense of humour. This makes him a good guide to lead us on some some intertextual slipping and sliding.

Coover opens with a breathless and jittery dreamscape of movie clichés colliding into one another (*The Phantom of the Movie Palace*) that is a breezy read, but leaves rather little behind it after the sound and fury has died away. The other long stories deal with a High Noon-style Western (*Shootout at Gentry's Junction*, a fairly broad comedy in which a flatulent and murderous Mexican bandit turns the tables on the good ol' boy sheriff), Charlie Chaplin-meets-Poe in a mash-up (*Charlie in the House of Rue*, in which rather tedious descriptions of Chaplin's set-ups as they get increasingly violent prove the old adage about pictures and a thousand words), a post-Purple Rose of Cairo adventure for a moviegoing party girl (*Intermission*), an excellent deconstruction of Fred Astaire's *Top Hat* set piece (*Top Hat*) and a prescient pre-Roger Rabbit look at real and cartoon characters coexisting (*Cartoon*).

And there are other, shorter pieces that also take up other genres (horror film manqué, a playful treatment of dissolves using, of course, only words etc.). Coover covers plenty of ground and when he's hot, he's hot. That said, there's an inherent frontier here, in which we have had to take on known characters seen sufficiently often not to allow us to be ourselves. The most we can do is draw some nods and chuckles out of the shared mythologies being blown apart - or Rick being blown by Ilsa - all of which tends to add up to smart, transgressive fun, but no grand earth-shattering revelations. Enjoyable? Very. Funny? Often. Impressive? Ditto. Ask no more from it and it delivers.

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## Vit Babenco says

I love watching art-house films and I enjoy books about movies. I've already read three great postmodern novel of this kind: *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West, *Blue Movie* by Terry Southern and *Zeroville* by Steve Erickson so *A Night at the Movies* is an excellent addition to this series.

Similar to ghost towns there is somewhere a ghost movie palace – there are no viewers but the ghostly movies keep running nonstop. And similar to *King Solomon's Song of Songs* there now is **Robert Coover**'s *Movie of Movies*.

And all those spectral films are being shown by the mad ghost of a projectionist...

“He overlays frenzy with freeze frames, the flight of rockets with the staking of the vampire's heart, Death's face with thrusting buttocks, cheesecake with chaingangs, and all just to prove to himself over and over again that nothing and everything is true. Slapstick is romance, heroism a dance number. Kisses kill.”

*After Lazarus* is a biblical absurdist comedy, *Shootout at Gentry's Junction* – a cynically hilarious revisionist western, *Gilda's Dream* – a dark dreamlike film noir...

“People speak of the heart as the seat of love, but in his profession he knows better. It is a most dark and mysterious labyrinth, where cruelty, suspicion, depravity, lewdness lurk like shadowy fiends, love being merely one of their more ruthless and morbid disguises.”

*Charlie in the House of Rue* is a murderous surrealistic slapstick, *Intermission* – a crazy hallucinatory adventure through the world and *You Must Remember This* – a grotesquely pornographic appendix to *Casablanca*

“...she's been watching movies all her life, so why stop now, right? Besides, isn't there always a happy ending? Has to be. It comes with the price of the ticket...”

Too many happy endings put together are prone to become a nauseous nightmare...

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### **Jesselyn says**

We get it, Robert Coover. You like to experiment with conceptual ideas and what characters would do that we don't see on screen. Most of these stories don't necessitate their (relatively short) lengths, and continue to (in the case of "You Must Remember This", literally) bang you over the head with his cool idea. The concept is great, just not very gratifying to read.

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### **Adam Rodenberger says**

Nice concept, but I found myself pretty unimpressed with the final product. The first story made sense - a menagerie of scenes from various movies thrown together on top of each other (both physically and metaphorically) - but the rest of the book seemed to fall flat for me. The writing was good, the stories were not.

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### **Algernon says**

#### **What kind of play is this? Who took the light away? And why is everybody laughing?**

I'm in awe at the power of Richard Coover not only to capture in words the magic of an eminently visual medium, but also at his dismantling and reassembling the sacred monsters of the silver screen that have become such an integral part of our cultural landscape. Every sequence in this collection starts with a bit of

nostalgia and homage to the genres depicted (western, big historical epic, noir crime, slapstick comedy, blockbuster adventure, cartoon, musical, romance) only to veer abruptly into darker territories where reader expectations are thoroughly overturned and challenged.

**Isn't there always a happy ending? Has to be. It comes with the price of the ticket.**

Not in this movie house, Buster. Every genre I mentioned earlier eventually gains a horror flavor, necessary to shake said reader out of complacently accepting the dream factory's established canon. Nightmares after all are just another form of dreams.

Another constant in the author's deconstruction effort is the malicious and lewd effort to expose the evils of the censorship culture that is still trying to decide what is acceptable and not in a certain genre. Coover chooses to start the programme with a classic disclaimer:

*Ladies and Gentlemen May Safely Visit this Theatre as no Offensive Films are ever Shown Here!*

Ha , bloody Ha! Irreverence and biting satire are a necessary ingredient to any analysis of the film industry. I personally hate calling movie making an industry driven only by profit, but I am also suspicious of some arthouse offerings that disdain the entertaining aspect of a story and the need for a coherent plot. Coover's success for me is due in no small part to his lively and original storytelling technique, worthy of name dropping similes of the calibre of Woody Allen, Mel Brooks or Fellini, all of whom made movies about movies and did their own part in the deconstruction and liberation of artistic expression through this medium. In the literary niche, the name of Coover has been associated with Italo Calvino. I can see how this argument can be sustained in a post-modernist landscape, but I believe each author is a product of his own society, with the Italian author displaying a more poetic and whimsical attitude to the more aggressive and offensive American. Choosing a favorite between the two is unnecessary, as they each excel in their own styles.

Coming back to the actual stories in the collection, I really wish I was back at the home computer instead of using a smartphone on a weak wi-fi connection, so I could insert the relevant pictures to each section. But they should be familiar to all movie aficionados, so I hope you get the 'picture' :

**The phantom of the movie palace** should be introduced by a scene from Mel Brooks' *Silent Comedy*, where a guy ends up in the projectionist room wrapped in unspooled film, rotating crazily round and round in order to keep the movie running. A mash-up of frames from a hundred different films, sliced together, superimposed, overturned or run backward are thrown at the silver screen of an empty auditorium abandoned by a public who prefers a TV screen or an impersonal mall multiplex. Some bizarre entity, a ghost in the machine is hunting the machinist all over the building:

*he feels suddenly like he's caught out in a no-man's land on a high trapeze with pie on his face, but he can't stop. It's too much fun. Or something like fun. He drives a stampede through upper story hotel rooms and out the windows, moves a monster's hideous scar to a dinner plate and breaks it, beards a breast, clothes a hurricane in a tutu. He knows there's something corrupt, maybe even dangerous about this collapsing of boundaries, but it's also liberating, augmenting his film library exponentially. And it is also necessary ...*

You can see here a sample preview of the author's style and why he has chosen to open the collection disguised as the nonconformist projectionist.

**Shootout at Gentry Junction** is easy to decode as a retelling of *High Noon*, so picture the longline silhouette of Gary Cooper ambling down an empty street in the harsh light of the desert. The chaotic element is embodied in the person of his adversary, a Mexican bandit that has no respect for the black and white moral conventions of the original movie.

**Lap dissolves** is a shorter piece but my second favorite after the comedy number, mostly because it once again showcases the wild yet fluid scene changing technique of Coover. While it is not limited to one genre, I bookmarked here a hard boiled detective rant that captures the particular dark vibe of the collection:

*People speak of the heart as the seat of love, but in his profession he knows better. It is a most dark and mysterious labyrinth, where cruelty, suspicion, depravity, lewdness lurk like shadowy fiends, love being merely one of their more ruthless and morbid disguises. To prowl these sewers of the heart is to crawl through hell itself. At every turning, another dismayng surprise, another ghastly atrocity.*

**Charlie in the House of Rue** is worth the price of admission all on its own. Picture our beloved Tramp with his toothbrush moustache visiting one of those sumptuous Art Deco mansions and silently going through his bag of tricks ... Until the laughter turns into silent howls of terror as the rooms change their order and the people living there compete in who's the craziest one around.

**Intermission** is a deceptive title for one of the longest sequences in the collection, a wild variation of the theme from The Purple Rose of Cairo, where one of the spectators gets to enter into the virtual reality behind the screen and have the adventure of her lifetime with the lead actor. Only, you know already, the movie she's in keeps changing from one minute to another and the thrills are generally the screaming in abject terror sort:

*I was in this crazy city where everything kept changing into something else all the time. A house would turn into a horse just as you walked out of it or a golf course would take off and fly or a street would become a dinner table right under your feet. You might lean against a wall and find yourself out on the edge of a cliff, or climb into a car that turned out to be the lobby of a movie theater.*

**Cartoon** brings together the animated and the living characters into a delightful comedy routine with the Looney Tunes kind of mayhem at its core.

**Milford Junction 1939** channels the dreamy, misty softness of David Lean's Brief Encounter, as a touching and, unusually for the author, profanity free metaphor for the escape we seek from our daily grind when we go to the cinema.

*A rather peculiar place, somehow there and not there at the same time, but no less real for all that, and, at the very least, a fascinating place in which to lose oneself for just a little while, on the way home to Churley or Ketchworth, until someone, meaning to be kind, gives you a shake and says, quite soberly and cruelly, "Wake up! We're here!" And all those silly dreams disappear.*

This could have been a good place to stop on a more upbeat note, but Coover has one more shot in his quiver for those who still gaze starry eyed at the greatest movie ever made (arguably). **You must remember this** applies his deconstructing hammer to the famous discrete and dark panel that hides what goes on in Rick's bedroom when Ilse comes to beg him for the tickets out of Casablanca. I'm not going to describe the going on, other than to say the scene may shock and enrage some readers even after all the hints the author dropped in the previous scenes.

So the movie is over, the curtain is raised, the lights come on and I must say goodbye for now. But like the Terminator, I'll be back for more from Richard Coover, a goodreads tip from my friends that turned out great.

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### **Oliver Bateman says**

I'd like to write that this was a truly fantastic book, but it wasn't. Like Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants*--and unlike his wonderful, propulsive, and thoroughly immersive *Ultimate Baseball Association--A Night at the Movies* struck me as a text that was intended for the aspiring writer, not the avid reader. In that sense, it's quite useful--there's a lot to learn here, and Coover's techniques are easy enough to grasp, even if their execution, however skillful, can be quite tedious--but I expected more from a collection with a premise this good. That being said, his postmodern Casablanca-inspired sex fantasy "You Must Remember This" is among the greatest short stories I've ever read, and well worth the purchase price. "Shootout at Gentry's Junction," "Cartoon," and "Lap Dissolves" are all pretty interesting as well (particularly the first in that grouping), but it was a hard slog getting through everything else--and this from a book that's less than 180 pages.

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### **Juliana Gray says**

I did not love this book. The stories were clever enough, but Coover seemed to hit the same notes in each one. Maybe it just seems dated; I'm sure if I'd read this in grad school, I would've enjoyed it a lot more.

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