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Purple America

by Rick Moody



About the Book

With his two richly praised previous novels, Rick Moody has won a reputation as one of the most talented writers at work today. Now, in **Purple America**, he has written the breakthrough novel that readers have eagerly anticipated: a brilliantly written and emotional exploration of the unruly forces that surge inside every family.

Purple America brings us a family *in extremis*: a son is summoned home to care for his mother, who has long been sick, after she is abandoned by her husband. Over the course of a single weekend night, the son, Hex Raitliffe, sees his good intentions annihilated by a phalanx of opposing forces?not least of them his own predilection for strong drink. Hex confronts his stepfather, stirs up the heat of an old attraction, and tries to accommodate his mothers demands. What begins as a mission of mercy leads, one fatal step after another, to confusion, debauchery, old wounds reopened, and the stinging revelations that only a visit home can bring.

The story arrives in the voices of Hex, his mother, his stepfather, and others whose paths they cross this night. Through their thoughts and their memories we see also, amazingly, a portrait of the family in its heyday: the joy of new love, the innocence of young families, and the optimism that brings people together with the idea of creating something new. Even as Hex reels through the catastrophic present, amid tears and confrontations and the shadow of death, the novel shows with great tenderness the beauty of everyday longings for shelter, for company, for family, for peace.

The rich weave of **Purple America** encompasses the suburbs and the city, growing up and growing old, vanity and humility, ambition and surrender. Illuminated by a fierce intelligence and animated in rhapsodic prose, this is an original and unforgettable work from a writer with dazzling strengths.

Discussion Guide

1. Despite Hex's obvious failures, he is not entirely unlikable. What are the qualities about him that make him a

sympathetic character? What clues about his childhood explain how he became the man he is? What about him is Jane Ingersoll attracted to?

2. Hex stutters out his words, at times almost incomprehensibly. Billie cannot speak without the electronic device. Louis and Allen communicate their most important thoughts in letters. What do you think Rick Moody is saying about communication today, about the way people discuss their feelings and emotions?

3. Louis Raitliffe leaves his wife Billie at a time in her life when she is most dependent on him. Is there any justification for his abandonment? Is there ever a time when a husband or wife can say, "I just can't take it any more. I have to live my own life"?

4. In addition to the nuclear power plant, what is leaking in Purple America? What is the significance of the leaking? How does it tie the Raitliffe family and plant together? How does the plant figure in the story?

5. What influence do Denny and Chris, the beatnik contractors who renovate the Raitliffes' house (chapter 11), have on Hex? Why is Hex especially susceptible to their influence? Have you ever had a similar experience -- that is, has a person you have known only fleetingly left an indelible impression on you or otherwise altered the course of your life?

6. Every couple's first sexual encounter has its awkward moments. What's unusual about Hex and Jane's first encounter (chapter 18)? Why do you think Jane whispers to herself things are pretty good when the coupling is over?

7. The color purple figures prominently throughout the book. What is the significance of it? How does Rick Moody use the different shades of purple -- e.g. lilac, royal purple, lavender -- to describe moods and feelings. Do you think this is an effective writing tool?

8. The relationship between Billie and Hex Raitliffe -- a mother and her son -- is at the heart of Purple America. But much of what happens in the novel relates directly to Hex's feelings about his father, Allen, and his stepfather, Louis. How do Hex's emotions and attitudes toward these two men evolve throughout the course of the novel? How is Hex himself changed by this evolution in attitude?

9. Hex saves his mother's life by getting her to the hospital and helps her die as soon as they return home. What changes his mind? Discuss the conflicting emotions that go through his mind on page 279.

10. Is the last chapter of Purple America -- Allen's letter to Billie -- tragic or hopeful? Does it make you feel sorry for Billie or relieved that she had some happiness in her life, someone who seemed truly to love her?

Author Bio

Rick Moody is the author of two memoirs --- THE LONG ACCOMPLISHMENT and the award-winning THE BLACK VEIL --- the novels HOTELS OF NORTH AMERICA, THE FOUR FINGERS OF DEATH, THE DIVINERS, PURPLE AMERICA, THE ICE STORM and GARDEN STATE, and multiple collections of short fiction. Moody is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and his work has been anthologized in *Best American Stories*, *Best American Essays*

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