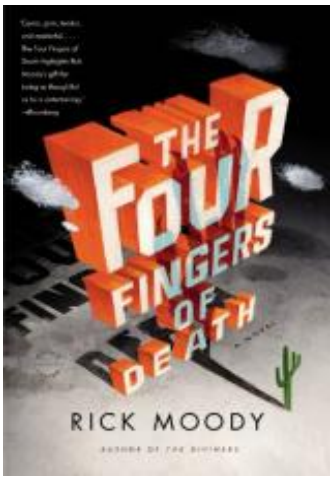
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The Four Fingers of Death

by Rick Moody



About the Book

Montese Crandall is a downtrodden writer whose rare collection of baseball cards won't sustain him, financially or emotionally, through the grave illness of his wife. Luckily, he swindles himself a job churning out a novelization of the 2025 remake of a 1963 horror classic, "The Crawling Hand." Crandall tells therein of the United States, in a bid to regain global eminence, launching at last its doomed manned mission to the desolation of Mars. Three space pods with nine Americans on board travel three months, expecting to spend three years as the planet's first colonists. When a secret mission to retrieve a flesh-eating bacterium for use in bio-warfare is uncovered, mayhem ensues.

Only a lonely human arm (missing its middle finger) returns to earth, crash-landing in the vast Sonoran Desert of Arizona. The arm may hold the secret to reanimation or it may simply be an infectious killing machine. In the ensuing days, it crawls through the heartbroken wasteland of a civilization at its breaking point, economically and culturally --- a dystopia of lowlife, emigration from America, and laughable lifestyle alternatives.

The Four Fingers of Death is a stunningly inventive, sometimes hilarious, monumental novel. It will delight admirers of comic masterpieces like **Slaughterhouse-Five**, **The Crying of Lot 49**, and **Catch-22**.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Montese Crandall?s very short stories. Why do you think he reduces his fiction to these brief sentences? How do they comment on the state of the literary world he?s living in? Why, other than for money, does Montese compose a much longer work, the novelization of The Four Fingers of Death, when he wins the chance to do so?

2. In 2009, Russia funded the ?Mars-500 Project,? locking six crew members into an isolation chamber for 105 days. How do you think you would manifest ?Planetary Exile Syndrome,? or ?Space Panic?? How does it affect each crew member in The Four Fingers of Death?

3. How does astronaut Jed Richards?s relationship with his daughter evolve over the duration of the mission in Book One? Why do you think it changed? Have you ever had a similar experience of change during absence from a loved one?

4. Why do you think Rick Moody chose to write Book One from Jed?s perspective and as a blog? How does the shift in narration between Book One and Book Two affect your reactions to the story?

5. Throughout the novel, instances of enlightenment --- the rogue NASA rover, Morton?s consciousness --- are juxtaposed with degeneration --- Jean-Paul?s infection, the omnium gatherum. Discuss other examples of each state, mental and physical. What significance do they have to the themes of the book as a whole?

6. Rick Moody conjures up dishonest bureaucratic careerists, proponents of bio-warfare, a dysfunctional president, mass emigration from the United States, and a trend toward violent, repressive sex. Do you think that the world in Book Two bears a resemblance to our own or to our near future? Why or why not? What do you think Rick Moody is implying about the state of society?

7. A reviewer for BookForum, James Gibbons, wrote of The Four Fingers of Death, ?Conceptual wizardry and emotional resonance are not reconciled with eae?so it is here, in the intersection of narrative excess and genuine feeling, that Moody is at his most daring and arresting.? What scenes or exchanges in the book most moved you? Why did you empathize with the characters at those points?

8. Rick Moody has said in an interview that the American desert is, for him ?big, empty, merciless, heartbroken, and inimical to human life.? How has their arid environment affected both the Mars astronauts in Book One and the communities in Book Two? If you have traveled to the southwest, how does your impression jibe with Moody?s?

9. The author dedicates this book to the memory of Kurt Vonnegut, a writer known for his stylish, sometimes apocalyptic, fiction. Elsewhere, Moody has expressed his early admiration for science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick and Joseph Heller?s Catch-22. If you have read any of these writers, do you see their influences at work in The Four Fingers of Death? In what ways?

10. Did Montese Crandall?s novelization of the classic horror film *The Crawling Hand* inspire you to see the film for yourself? Were you drawn to horror films as a teenager, and if so, how did this novel satisfy your attraction to that genre?

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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