

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

**THE
SUGAR
FROSTED
NUTSACK**

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A NOVEL BY

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MARK LEYNER

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN NOVELISTS RICK MOODY AND MARK LEYNER

Rick Moody: So, I think it's twelve or fifteen years since your last novel, correct?

Mark Leyner: I don't know exactly. Some gaping period, some inexplicable period of time.

RM: The obvious question is: Why did it take so long to write *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack*? Part of that has to do with what you did instead for a while. But from the point of view of fiction writing, did you do other things because you felt like the form wasn't amenable to you after the last novel?

ML: When you say, *What took so long?*—that's a beautiful way to phrase it, because I like to think of it now as some sort of necessary exile that resulted in this book. But some of the reasons for taking that break were aesthetic, and some were practical. I had done a number of books then, starting with *I Smell Esther Williams* and ending with *The Tetherballs of Bougainville*. And I thought at the time that I had thoroughly explored a series of issues about writing fiction, and I wanted to take a break because I wasn't feeling a kind of urgency or avidity about it anymore. When I say "explored," I don't necessarily mean I worked from a more primitive exploration in the first book and then peaked with the most sophisticated in the last. I'm not even sure that's the case.

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But when I started publishing, I was woefully naive about the career of a writer. I didn't know you had to put a book out every couple of years to renew your membership in the club of writers. I just thought you did it because you were overtaken by a burst of enthusiasm about venturing into certain places. I wasn't thrilled with the idea that this is what you have to do to make a career. And then my wife and I had a kid, and I started to think things through more practically. I had a little bubble of public attention at that time, and I already knew that wasn't going to last forever. So there were two factors simultaneously: one was a certain fatigue with this automotive model of putting out a book each year or two, and the other was the desire to try some other things that might be lucrative, like journalism or teaching. I mean, I could go on about why I didn't end up doing those things, why I didn't teach, if you're interested.

RM: Well, what I'm really curious about is how this book called to you out of the silence. Was part of the twelve years thinking about how to write this book?

ML: To some degree I live like a kidnapping victim: just someone who is blindfolded and put in a trunk, and then the car stops and I'm let out. And if you look at any one period of time in my life, it seems like there's some plotted trajectory, but it's much more sporadic and random than that.

I think that a lot of the time was spent—again, some of this is very mundane—a lot of that time was spent working with other people on various things, like going back

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and forth to Los Angeles and working on all sorts of movie projects, some completely misbegotten and futile, some not. Different things like that, but all very collaborative projects.

I'm a very shy person who took to writing because I like being by myself, and in those years I found myself in a life that required such a degree of social activity that, eventually, it pressed me back into just wanting to be by myself. Certainly being confined within one's thinking is one of the subjects of the book, you know, living within the universe of your own cognition. I wrote this book in such isolation. I had never written anything like this before. I didn't show a sentence to anyone, from the beginning to the end. I didn't do readings. All of those things can be comforting. You're writing and you flash a little of it to someone and they appreciate it, and you think, OK. But I didn't want that kind of comfort this time. I believed I needed to be steeped in the real, intransigently pure, lone wolf world of this book, that it would make this book such a strange piece of work if I had to just finally, truly trust myself about it the whole way through. It changed the taste of the book for me. And I love that so much more than any other thing—the feeling I get when I'm most involved in working, when writing this book. I feel the most vivid sense of being alive I have as a human being. And that's what I had been away from for a long time, and it really did feel like a ridiculous exile, but one that was necessary when I look back on it.

RM: Is there a way that the financial success of a book like *Why Do Men Have Nipples?* makes possible a book as uncompromising as *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack*?

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ML: I'm completely irresponsible with money. If I have it, I just run through it as fast as possible. I don't know if you had this feeling, but when I first started thinking about writing seriously, and thinking of myself as someone who always had a project like a poem to write or something, I would have been just euphoric to see my book in a bookstore. I couldn't even imagine what that would be like. So I still feel that way, really. I love doing this, and I think that the further I got from it, the more I eventually loved it when I came back to it. It's so amazing to me that text—this kind of uniform grid of little glyphs, these black things—can provide such a phantasmagoric experience to someone deciphering them. I mean, it's just so mind-bogglingly wonderful to be a part of that.

A funny thing happened to me in Los Angeles. Maybe three years ago, I had been working on this movie and I think I was there to help with the sound mix or something. I was coming back and I was walking to get my car. I was staying at this funny hotel in Culver City, it was a hotel where all the Munchkins had stayed when they made—

RM: I was just there. I know that hotel. It's crazy. It's like a ghost hotel.

ML: Yeah! And they have all those pictures of Munchkins on the wall. And I'm small, so there seemed to be something meaningful to me about being in the Munchkin hotel. I mean, I'm not that small. And I'm a strong Munchkin; I work out. So I was walking to get my car, there had been some construction there, and I'm crossing the street in the morning, it's like

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seven o'clock, to take this car to LAX, and I get hit by a car. And I mean really hard. I don't know if you've ever been hit by a car but it's a kind of stunning thing. Time does slow down a little and you have a moment to think, *What the fuck was that?* It's so violent, you can't imagine—it's unimaginable. So for a second, you just think, *I don't know what that could've been.* Then you say, *Oh, that car hit me.*

I saw that accident as Los Angeles saying, *Enough of you.* And it was mutual. I really do think of the world as a kind of cryptogram, a word I notice you use in your wonderful piece about Artaud that I adore. I am very hermeneutical. I'm interested in trying to tease out significance from everything. So I came back after the accident, and I couldn't really walk and I was in bed and I just started reading. I read *Moby-Dick*; I read a beautiful book, *Jude the Obscure*; I read *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

RM: I love that book.

ML: I thought, *This is what I love doing.* It sounds trite, but it was a signal event in my life. So I lay in bed thinking about this.

When I was a little boy, I saw that movie *Mothra*, which I talk about in the book. In the movie, there are these two little girls. As an eight-year-old boy, I thought about that endlessly—I have to be honest—what that would be like to possess them in my room. In benign ways, I would be nice to them but they would still be mine.

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RM: Maybe we should explain *Mothra* for those at home: *Mothra* is an installment in the Godzilla series, and it involves a very large caterpillar-like thing that can be summoned by two Japanese damsels who are kept in a tiny little cabinet, sort of a cabin of wonders.

ML: Or like a little terrarium.

RM: And they open it up, and the two little girls are standing there, and they sing.

ML: There's a song they sing. You can get it on YouTube. My memory of it is that they weren't little girls, actually; they were miniaturized little Japanese pop star girls with sleeveless '60s dresses. But I became really fascinated with that idea of just having little ones to play with. This is not far from an incipient ambition to be a writer, to want to have little helpless creatures you can do things to.

RM: We're actually dancing around the subject of the book in some ways because it's hard to talk about. But let's try to touch upon it briefly. A part of what you're saying is that a novelist is sort of a puppet master, let's say. And what's immediately apparent to someone who's read widely in the classics is how the contour of *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* is very much like the mythical narratives of Ovid or Hesiod, or the Old Testament or Mahabharata or something like that. Was that point of origin completely conscious on your part?

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ML: I think that one of the things that makes this book unique is its even mix of what seems absolutely spontaneous and things that seem rigorously worked and analyzed. I always find that fascinating about mythology. Sometimes myths seem like something a kid made up to entertain an adult: Oh, there was this bird, and it had one lead wing, and one wing made out of popcorn, and the popcorn wing was eaten by people who just came out of a movie theater, which just showed the origin of the universe. Myths have that improvisational quality to them. But they also have a graven quality, a quality of having been hammered out of timeless verities. So I really like the interplay of both.

One of the things that I really wanted to play with in this book was how incidents and phenomena that are completely incidental and trivial and fleeting can take on a kind of lapidary significance. And I think this is true in the mythmaking of families. In my family, there's a story that's endlessly told about an uncle of mine. At his shore house, my grandfather would make a pitcher of martinis every day, a pitcher of clear liquid—and my uncle came in one day late in the afternoon, hot and thirsty from playing tennis, and just chugged this pitcher, thinking it was water. And then his eyes rolled back and he just collapsed backward. Now everyone loves this story for some reason; it's as if there are bards who will continuously tell this story at family gatherings. It's a myth made out of an incident from an afternoon.

RM: That actually leads me to a completely different tangent, which is—unless I miss my guess—Ike's biography is

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very similar to yours. Is the sort of virtuosic and astonishing act of imagination that is the entire heavenly cast that you provide in *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* compensatory for the fact that it's the most autobiographical of your work?

ML: Well, I can't accept the premise of that question with any humility. Thank you. That's a very sweet question. I think what you said is absolutely true. I think—whatever this means—that this is the most honest book of mine in a number of ways. I think this is a very generous book, but that's not unusual. I have always thought of what I do as an enormous act of generosity, trying to give the reader the most amazing experience possible. Wouldn't it be great if I could delight someone and blow someone's mind in a completely unique way—wouldn't that be wonderful? I've never understood various interpretations of what I do as being aggressively ironic or hermetic or elitist or any of the various things that people can say about it, because my impulse is just to give the reader enormous pleasure. It's really shamelessly seductive and flirtatious. This book itself is an incantation of seductiveness, and it's also honest in all kinds of ways. It's honest about the kind of bedeviling thinking with which I am—for lack of a better word—afflicted, which is always to think that things mean more than what they seem, which makes life infinitely more complicated. And for there to be no outside.

I think as I've gotten older I've gotten less and less gregarious, much more solitary, more reclusive. And speaking in terms of the autobiographical aspect, this is a very honest

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book about being older, about death, about sex and the kind of women I find uniquely attractive. And it's about the realization that at some point I'm not going to elude the captivity of myself as I once thought I would. And that's good and bad. I'm just deeper in the catacombs of my own captivity. I can say without question that this is what this book is about to a degree.

RM: So the structural recursion is emblematic of that?

ML: Yes, absolutely.

RM: I want to arrive at a summarizing question. Now that you've written a novel after this long silence, is it still possible for you to look back on what you've done before and see this as part and parcel of that endeavor, or does it belong in a completely new phase of Mark Leyner?

ML: If possible, both. It's important to me that my work be unlike that of anybody else—and that's not important to everybody, but it's always been to me. To an unusual degree in my work, this book is the apogee of that desire for originality, and in that way it's not completely separate phenomena from the rest of my work. I haven't started anew somehow. But I think it's the purest version of what I do, and it's the beginning point to move forward with my writing. With this book, I tried to write sentences that so destabilize the preceding sentences that a different kind of book is created and undermined line by line. I think that achieves something

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meaningful. I'm very aware of choreographing a response from a reader, almost in a medical way. It's like saying, *Oh, we're going to inject this now. Let's see what happens.* Reading is just a series of micro-effects on the consciousness of the reader. I want my writing to require the kind of attention on the part of a reader that I hope is a hyper-vivid experience of reading, of being alive, of trying to contort your thinking to grapple with something. With this book, I was more acutely aware than ever of the mechanics of creating that kind of experience, and I think there are a lot more places to take that that I haven't yet. I think there might have been a time when I thought that my work would become more conventional or narrative, and you can see in the books before—to the extent that any of those words mean anything to me—they sort of did. *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* certainly had more of a story than *My Cousin*. And I know now that I don't have any particular stake in narrative like that. I have an enormous stake in pursuing this program to create as sensational a series of lines and paragraphs and texts capable of the most radical destabilization as possible. This is not any sort of kind of automatic writing. As you have written about beautifully, and people have written about Artaud, to me, this is the most rigorous, scientific thing I'm doing. You could say that this book is the culmination of what I've done. But in another way, *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* is so distant from any other book I did in how stubborn, in how militantly, it is what it is. That's been astonishing even to me.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In a profile of Mark Leyner, journalist Adam Sternbergh called *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* “a strange and indescribable novel, even by the standards of Leyner, purveyor of the strange and difficult to describe.” How would you describe this indescribable novel to a friend? And how would you describe the experience of describing the indescribable?
2. Mark Leyner wrote *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* in complete isolation without receiving feedback or guidance from a single person throughout the process. In an interview, Leyner said, “This book had to have a certain completely enclosed, impenetrably claustrophobic kind of madness to it.” How does this compare to your personal experience reading the book? Have you ever had a similar experience in your own life of isolating yourself from the world?
3. The book poses the question “What Makes Ike a Hero?” followed by a list of sixteen hero-making qualities, including Ike’s hatred of the rich, his efforts to situate himself in history, his ongoing self-narration, and his unwavering belief in his untimely death, among others. In what ways does Ike resemble your idea of a hero?

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4. *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* is peppered with a vast number of celebrities and influential people whose names we recognize (and sometimes don't recognize), ranging from *Jersey Shore*'s Snooki to Japan's minister of finance, Shoichi Nakagawa. Ike himself despises rich celebrities, and yet is practically a celebrity himself within the epic. What do you think Leyner is implying about celebrity culture? In what ways are celebrities present in your everyday life?
5. *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* has been described as a "visionary comedy" as well as "at times almost achingly sad." What moments in the novel moved you, and why? What moments did you find funniest?
6. In addition to writing fiction, Mark Leyner has worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood. How do you think Leyner's experience with film and television influences his fiction? What elements of the book did you find particularly cinematic?
7. While *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack*, as an epic, is described, discussed, and analyzed, an epic tale is conspicuously missing, making a reading of this book much like reading an introduction to or review of a work without having access to the work itself. Discuss this kind of reading experience and what effect it had on you. Did you find it liberating, frustrating, or SUPER-SEXY?

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8. What are your favorite Greek myths? Why do you think these myths have endured for so long? In what ways does *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* draw from and muddle up the elements of the traditional Greek myth, and to what effect?
9. Many reviewers of *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* have likened the book's effect to that of mind-altering drugs. Drugs themselves play a large role in the epic, most notably when Ike and Vance get "SO high" on gravy. Do you think fiction can have a drug-like power to alter your mind? Discuss when fiction has done this for you.
10. "That the Gods only occur in Ike's mind is not a refutation of their actuality. It is, on the contrary, irrefutable proof of their empirical existence. The Gods choose to only exist in Ike's mind. They are real by virtue of this, their prerogative." Discuss the themes of religion and belief in the book. Do you think believing in something affirms its existence? What are the beliefs, religious or not, that are most important to you?