

Entertainment

Arts preview: Punk anti-hero Richard Hell talks about new autobiography

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By Jackie Mantey, Columbus Alive

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Things like the Millennial-seducing, eff-your-standards website were made possible by Hell. As celebrity chef/author/ badass Anthony Bourdain put it, "Before Hell, all was darkness. He can rightly claim to have started... everything."

Bourdain, Kathleen Hanna, Thurston Moore, Luc Sante - all have penned a glowing review of Hell's recent contribution to his punk-rock mythos, "I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp."

The autobiography's title comes from a line in a story (of which Buzzfeed recently ran a photo of) Hell wrote as a kid about the first time he tried to run away. What readers glean, un sentimentally, is that that memory is one of the last he has of his father, who died of a heart attack soon after.

The book starts with Hell's childhood in Kentucky, where the wannabe-cowboy got lost and lonely in the shuffle of "hardass rednecks" and homework. Obviously intelligent, he got access to a private school through an academic scholarship (even though his grades sucked) but eventually dropped out in order to - you'll see a theme here - run away.

Hell's telling of his life thereafter is unclouded by hyperbole. Straightforward, interestingly done weavings of story and description are littered with occasional punches of universal truths. He writes about his bands, his poetry, his struggle to make a life as an unredenting artist even if he didn't call himself that at the time, his planting of the roots of punk-rock and his warranted frustration that the Sex Pistols just kind of lifted his attitude and style and took it all the way into the annals of popular rock history.

And, of course, boobs.

While, thankfully, not a terrible rock star retelling of all his sexual endeavors (most of his sexual encounters he describes as "she let me have sex with her"), the book is packed with pit stops on a man's sexual journey that are relayed in his truth, no matter how disparagingly honest - about him or those he had sex with.

"There's a lot of talk of misogyny," Hell said about criticism he's faced since the book was released. "There's a lot of talk that I'm a terrible writer or that I'm a great writer. There's definitely a difference of mentality. Some people talk about how egotistical I am, others how honest or self-aware I am... But it was the truth. And that was what was important to me. To tell the truth as much as I could."

"I Dreamed I was a Very Clean Tramp" is, indeed, refreshing in its reverberation of truth of such an interesting life lived and an encouraging book for anyone who has ever tried to live like Hell - anti-authoritarian, truthful no matter how painful, artistic.

As for Hell, he's found new ways to run away, a desire that manifested as a child probably as a way to express the outrage of adult conformity.

"I like my life to be pretty peaceful now. It's going well. I am happily married. I've been with my wife 17 years. I like our routine," Hell said. "My adventures take place in my work. In my work it is important to me to start fresh over and over. All my books are really different from each other. I'm always looking for ways to undermine my habits. I keep trying to challenge myself, challenge that impulse to enter an environment that is familiar and to be free of all the sort of strictures you placed on yourself because of people's expectations, the complacency and general just doing what you know works already. I'm very conscious of the importance of undermining that complacency."

What Would Richard Hell Do?

Probably tell you to stop caring what he'd do and go read a book or something. Might as well make it his.

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