

entirely beyond possibility. We may well, in concert, wish that such might be the case!

(Doris Peloris the chorus and Morris sonorous canorous Horace scores Boris—should be able to make *some*thin outa that by juniper then there's bore us and whore us and up the old torus do not so good not so good losin the old touch I am by damn/*ah!* *Rameses!* why'd they go and *do* that to ye for? it's the motherin insane are free!)

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

1

A pine forest in the midafternoon. Two children follow an old man, dropping breadcrumbs, singing nursery tunes. Dense earthy greens seep into the darkening distance, flecked and streaked with filtered sunlight. Spots of red, violet, pale blue, gold, burnt orange. The girl carries a basket for gathering flowers. The boy is occupied with the crumbs. Their song tells of God's care for little ones.

2

Poverty and resignation weigh on the old man. His cloth jacket is

patched and threadbare, sunbleached white over the shoulders, worn through on the elbows. His feet do not lift, but shuffle through the dust. White hair. Parched skin. Secret forces of despair and guilt seem to pull him earthward.

3

The girl plucks a flower. The boy watches curiously. The old man stares impatiently into the forest's depths, where night seems already to crouch. The girl's apron is a bright orange, the gay color of freshly picked tangerines, and is stitched happily with blues and reds and greens; but her dress is simple and brown, tattered at the hem, and her feet are bare. Birds accompany the children in their singing and butterflies decorate the forest spaces.

4

The boy's gesture is furtive. His right hand trails behind him, letting a crumb fall. His face is half-turned toward his hand, but his eyes remain watchfully fixed on the old man's feet ahead. The old man wears heavy mud-spattered shoes, high-topped and leather-thonged. Like the old man's own skin, the shoes are dry and cracked and furrowed with wrinkles. The boy's pants are a bluish-brown, ragged at the cuffs, his jacket a faded red. He, like the girl, is barefoot.

5

The children sing nursery songs about May baskets and gingerbread houses and a saint who ate his own fleas. Perhaps they sing to

lighten their young hearts, for puce wisps of dusk now coil through the trunks and branches of the thickening forest. Or perhaps they sing to conceal the boy's subterfuge. More likely, they sing for no reason at all, a thoughtless childish habit. To hear themselves. Or to admire their memories. Or to entertain the old man. To fill the silence. Conceal their thoughts. Their expectations.

6

The boy's hand and wrist, thrusting from the outgrown jacket (the faded red cuff is not a cuff at all, but the torn limits merely, the ragged edge of the soft worn sleeve), are tanned, a little soiled, childish. The fingers are short and plump, the palm soft, the wrist small. Three fingers curl under, holding back crumbs, kneading them, coaxing them into position, while the index finger and thumb flick them sparingly, one by one, to the ground, playing with them a moment, balling them, pinching them as if for luck or pleasure, before letting them go.

7

The old man's pale blue eyes float damply in deep dark pouches, half-shrouded by heavy upper lids and bearded over by shaggy white brows. Deep creases fan out from the moist corners, angle down past the nose, score the tanned cheeks and pinch the mouth. The old man's gaze is straight ahead, but at what? Perhaps at nothing. Some invisible destination. Some irrecoverable point of departure. One thing can be said about the eyes: they are tired. Whether they have seen too much or too little, they betray no will to see yet more.

The witch is wrapped in a tortured whirl of black rags. Her long face is drawn and livid, and her eyes glow like burning coals. Her angular body twists this way and that, flapping the black rags—flecks of blue and amethyst wink and flash in the black tangle. Her gnarled blue hands snatch greedily at space, shred her clothes, claw cruelly at her face and throat. She cackles silently, then suddenly screeches madly, seizes a passing dove, and tears its heart out.

8

9

The girl, younger than the boy, skips blithely down the forest path, her blonde curls flowing freely. Her brown dress is coarse and plain, but her apron is gay and white petticoats wink from beneath the tattered hem. Her skin is fresh and pink and soft, her knees and elbows dimpled, her cheeks rosy. Her young gaze flicks airily from flower to flower, bird to bird, tree to tree, from the boy to the old man, from the green grass to the encroaching darkness, and all of it seems to delight her equally. Her basket is full to overflowing. Does she even know the boy is dropping crumbs? or where the old man is leading them? Of course, but it's nothing! a gamel

10

There is, in the forest, even now, a sunny place, with mintdrop trees and cotton candy bushes, an air as fresh and heady as lemonade. Rivulets of honey flow over gumdrop pebbles, and lollypops grow

wild as daisies. This is the place of the gingerbread house. Children come here, but they say, none leave.

11

The dove is a soft lustrous white, head high, breast filled, tip of the tail less than a feather's thickness off the ground. From above, it would be seen against the pale path—a mixture of umbers and grays and the sharp brown strokes of pine needles—but from its own level, in profile, its pure whiteness is set off glowingly against the obscure mallows and distant moss greens of the forest. Only its small beak moves. Around a bread crumb.

12

The song is about a great king who won many battles, but the girl sings alone. The old man has turned back, gazes curiously but dispassionately now at the boy. The boy, too, has turned, no longer furtive, hand poised but no crumb dropping from his fingertips. He stares back down the path by which they three have come, his mouth agape, his eyes startled. His left hand is raised, as if arrested a moment before striking out in protest. Doves are eating his bread crumbs. His ruse has failed. Perhaps the old man, not so ignorant in such matters after all, has known all along it would. The girl sings of pretty things sold in the market.

13

So huddled over her prey is the witch that she seems nothing more

than a pile of black rags heaped on a post. Her pale long-nailed hands are curled inward toward her breast, massaging the object, her head lower than her hunched shoulders, wan beaked nose poked in among the restless fingers. She pauses, cackling softly, peers left, then right, then lifts the heart before her eyes. The burnished heart of the dove glitters like a ruby, a polished cherry, a brilliant, heart-shaped bloodstone. It beats still. A soft radiant pulsing. The black bony shoulders of the witch quake with glee, with greed, with lust.

14

A wild blur of fluttering white: the dove's wings flapping! Hands clutch its body, its head, its throat, small hands with short plump fingers. Its wings fall against the dusky forest green, but it is forced down against the umber earth. The boy falls upon it, his hands bloodied by beak and claws.

15

The gingerbread house is approached by flagstones of variegated waters, through a garden of candied fruits and all-day suckers in neat little rows.

16

No song now from the lips of the girl, but a cry of anguish. The basket of flowers is dropped, the kings and saints forgotten. She struggles with the boy for the bird. She kicks him, falls upon him,

pulls his hair, tears at his red jacket. He huddles around the bird, trying to elbow free of the girl. Both children are weeping, the boy of anger and frustration, the girl of pain and pity and a bruised heart. Their legs entangle, their fists beat at each other, feathers fly.

17

The pale blue eyes of the old man stare not ahead, but down. The squint, the sorrow, the tedium are vanished; the eyes focus clearly. The deep creases fanning out from the damp corners pinch inward, a brief wince, as though at some inner hurt, some certain anguish, some old wisdom. He sighs.

18

The girl has captured the bird. The boy, small chest heaving, kneels in the path watching her, the anger largely drained out of him. His faded red jacket is torn; his pants are full of dust and pine needles. She has thrust the dove protectively beneath her skirt, and sits, knees apart, leaning over it, weeping softly. The old man stoops down, lifts her bright orange apron, her skirt, her petticoats. The boy turns away. The dove is nested in her small round thighs. It is dead.

19

Shadows have lengthened. Umbers and lavenders and greens have grayed. But the body of the dove glows yet in the gathering dusk. The whiteness of the ruffled breast seems to be fighting back against

the threat of night. It is strewn with flowers, now beginning to wilt. The old man, the boy, and the girl have gone.

20

The beams of the gingerbread house are licorice sticks, cemented with taffy, weatherboarded with gingerbread, and coated with caramel. Peppermint-stick chimneys sprout randomly from its chocolate roof and its windows are laced with meringue. Oh, what a house! and the best thing of all is the door.

21

The forest is dense and deep. Branches reach forth like arms. Brown animals scurry. The boy makes no furtive gestures. The girl, carrying her flowerbasket, does not skip or sing. They walk, arms linked, eyes wide open and staring ahead into the forest. The old man plods on, leading the way, his heavy old leather-thonged shoes shuffling in the damp dust and undergrowth.

22

The old man's eyes, pale in the sunlight, now seem to glitter in the late twilight. Perhaps it is their wetness picking up the last flickering light of day. The squint has returned, but it is not the squint of weariness: resistance, rather. His mouth opens as though to speak, to rebuke, but his teeth are clenched. The witch twists and quivers, her black rags whirling, whipping, flapping. From her lean bosom,

she withdraws the pulsing red heart of a dove. How it glows, how it rages, how it dances in the dusk! The old man now does not resist. Lust flattens his face and mists his old eyes, where glitter now reflections of the ruby heart. Grimacing, he plummets forward, covering the cackling witch, crashing through brambles that tear at his clothes.

23

A wild screech cleaves the silence of the dusky forest. Birds start up from branches and the undergrowth is alive with frightened animals. The old man stops short, one hand raised protectively in front of him, the other, as though part of the same instinct, reaching back to shield his children. Dropping her basket of flowers, the girl cries out in terror and springs forward into the old man's arms. The boy blanches, shivers as though a cold wind might be wetly wrapping his young body, but manfully holds his ground. Shapes seem to twist and coil, and vapors seep up from the forest floor. The girl whimpers and the old man holds her close.

24

The beds are simple but solid. The old man himself has made them. The sun is setting, the room is in shadows, the children tucked safely in. The old man tells them a story about a good fairy who granted a poor man three wishes. The wishes, he knows, were wasted, but so then is the story. He lengthens the tale with details about the good fairy, how sweet and kind and pretty she is, then lets the children complete the story with their own wishes, their own dreams. Below, a brutal demand is being forced upon him. Why must the goodness of all wishes come to nothing?

The flowerbasket lies, overturned, by the forest path, its wilting flowers strewn. Shadows darker than dried blood spread beneath its gaping mouth. The shadows are long, for night is falling.

25

The old man has fallen into the brambles. The children, weeping, help pull him free. He sits on the forest path staring at the boy and girl. It is as though he is unable to recognize them. Their weeping dies away. They huddle more closely together, stare back at the old man. His face is scratched, his clothes torn. He is breathing irregularly.

26

The sun, the songs, the breadcrumbs, the dove, the overturned basket, the long passage toward night: where, the old man wonders, have all the good fairies gone? He leads the way, pushing back the branches. The children follow, silent and frightened.

27

28

The boy pales and his heart pounds, but manfully he holds his ground. The witch writhes, her black rags fluttering, licking at the

twisted branches. With a soft seductive cackle, she holds before him the burnished cherry-red heart of a dove. The boy licks his lips. She steps back. The glowing heart pulses gently, evenly, excitingly.

29

The good fairy has sparkling blue eyes and golden hair, a soft sweet mouth and gentle hands that caress and soothe. Gossamer wings sprout from her smooth back; from her flawless chest two firm breasts with tips bright as rubies.

30

The witch, holding the flaming pulsing heart out to the boy, steps back into the dark forest. The boy, in hesitation, follows. Back. Back. Swollen eyes aglitter, the witch draws the ruby heart close to her dark lean breast, then past her shoulder and away from the boy. Transfixed, he follows it, brushing by her. The witch's gnarled and bluish fingers claw at his poor garments, his pale red jacket and bluish-brown pants, surprising his soft young flesh.

31

The old man's shoulders are bowed earthward, his face is lined with sorrow, his neck bent forward with resignation, but his eyes glow like burning coals. He clutches his shredded shirt to his throat, stares intensely at the boy. The boy stands alone and trembling on the path, staring into the forest's terrible darkness. Shapes whisper

and coil. The boy licks his lips, steps forward. A terrible shriek shreds the forest hush. The old man grimaces, pushes the whimpering girl away, strikes the boy.

32

No more breadcrumbs, no more pebbles, no more songs or flowers. The slap echoes through the terrible forest, doubles back on its own echoes, folding finally into a sound not unlike a whispering cackle.

33

The girl, weeping, kisses the struck boy and presses him close, shielding him from the tormented old man. The old man, taken aback, reaches out uncertainly, gently touches the girl's frail shoulder. She shakes his hand off—nearly a shudder—and shrinks toward the boy. The boy squares his shoulders, color returning to his face. The familiar creases of age and despair crinkle again the old man's face. His pale blue eyes mist over. He looks away. He leaves the children by the last light of day.

34

But the door! The door is shaped like a heart and is as red as a cherry, always half-open, whether lit by sun or moon, is sweeter than a sugarpalum, more enchanting than a peppermint stick. It is red as a poppy, red as an apple, red as a strawberry, red as a bloodstone, red as a rose. Oh, what a thing is the door of that house!

35

The children, alone in the strange black forest, huddle wretchedly under a great gnarled tree. Owls hoot and bats flick menacingly through the twisting branches. Strange shapes writhe and rustle before their weary eyes. They hold each other tight and, trembling, sing lullabies, but they are not reassured.

36

The old man trudges heavily out of the black forest. His way is marked, not by breadcrumbs, but by dead doves, ghostly white in the empty night.

37

The girl prepares a mattress of leaves and flowers and pinecedles. The boy gathers branches to cover them, to hide them, to protect them. They make pillows of their poor garments. Bats screech as they work and owls blink down on their bodies, ghostly white, young, trembling. They creep under the branches, disappearing into the darkness.

38

Gloomily, the old man sits in the dark room and stares at the empty

beds. The good fairy, though a mystery of the night, effuses her surroundings with a lustrous radiance. Is it the natural glow of her small nimble body or perhaps the star at the tip of her wand? Who can tell? Her gossamer wings flutter rapidly, and she floats, ruby-tipped breasts downward, legs dangling and dimpled knees bent slightly, glowing buttocks arched up in defiance of the night. How good she is! In the black empty room, the old man sighs and uses up a wish: he wishes his poor children well.

39

The children are nearing the gingerbread house. Passing under mindrop trees, sticking their fingers in the cotton candy bushes, sampling the air as heady as lemonade, they skip along singing nursery songs. Nonsense songs about dappled horses and the slaying of dragons. Counting songs and idle riddles. They cross over rivulets of honey on gumdrop pebbles, picking the lollypops that grow as wild as daffodils.

40

The witch flicks and flutters through the blackened forest, her livid face twisted with hatred, her inscrutable condition. Her eyes burn like glowing coals and her black rags flap loosely. Her gnarled hands claw greedily at the branches, tangle in the night's webs, dig into tree trunks until the sap flows beneath her nails. Below, the boy and girl sleep an exhausted sleep. One ghostly white leg, with dimpled knee and soft round thigh, thrusts out from under the blanket of branches.

41

But wish again! Flowers and butterflies. Dense earthy greens seeping into the distance, flecked and streaked with midafternoon sunlight. Two children following an old man. They drop bread-crumbs, sing nursery songs. The old man walks leadenly. The boy's gesture is furtive. The girl—but it's no use, the doves will come again, there are no reasonable wishes.

42

The children approach the gingerbread house through a garden of candied fruits and all-day suckers, hopping along on flagstones of variegated wafers. They sample the gingerbread weatherboarding with its caramel coating, lick at the meringue on the windowsills, kiss each other's sweetened lips. The boy climbs up on the chocolate roof to break off a peppermint-stick chimney, comes sliding down into a rainbarrel full of vanilla pudding. The girl, reaching out to catch him in his fall, slips on a sugarplum and tumbles into a sticky rock garden of candied chestnuts. Laughing gaily, they lick each other clean. And how grand is the red-and-white striped chimney the boy holds up for her! how bright! how sweet! But the door: here they pause and catch their breath. It is heart-shaped and blood-stone-red, its burnished surface gleaming in the sunlight. Oh, what a thing is that door! Shining like a ruby, like hard cherry candy, and pulsing softly, radiantly. Yes, marvelous! delicious! insuperable! but beyond: what is that sound of black rags flapping?

ROBERT COOVER BIOGRAPHY

I am floating in a world made entirely of text. Lines of white courier type stretch away to the horizon, spelling out passages from Borges's "The Library of Babel": "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an infinite number of hexagonal galleries . . . " I look down and experience a sudden twinge of vertigo. Below my feet, strings of letters plunge down into an inky black void.



If you find yourself trapped in a prison-house of language, you shouldn't be surprised that your jailer is a postmodern novelist. Robert Coover is standing next to me, hands thrust casually into his trouser pockets. His face is obscured by a pair of stereoscopic 3D goggles, just like the ones I'm wearing. They give him a sort of retro-futurist look, one part Blade Runner to one part campus comedy. Coover, along with such writers as Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, Donald Barthelme and John Barth, broke open the carapace of postwar American realism to reveal a fantastical funhouse of narrative possibilities. His relentless experimentalism, combined with a sly and often bawdy humour, have made him a writer's writer, a hero to those who feel smothered by the marshmallowy welter of pseudo-literary romance that dominates contemporary fiction. Refreshingly unconcerned with psychology, sympathy, redemption, epiphanies and conventional narrative construction (or rather, concerned with undoing these things), he is relatively unknown in Britain, where three of his books (*Pricksongs & Descants*, *Gerald's Party* and *Brigar Rose & Spanking the Maid*) have recently been released as Penguin Modern Classics.

There is, as Derrida wrote, nothing outside the text. Except that in this case there is. We are in a lab at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, playing with a Cave (computer automated virtual environment), an immersive 3D space which for many years Coover has promoted as a tool for writing. He is interested, he says, in "how you do narrative, which is typically linear, in a space that is non-linear". In a Cave that space is a room-sized cube, on to whose interior walls high-resolution projectors display images. Our LCD shutter glasses are darkening first one eye, then the other at very high speed, in synchronisation with the projectors, which are displaying different images for each eye. My glasses have short stalks protruding from them, topped by little balls, which allow infrared sensors to pick up positional information and alter the image depending on where I'm looking. I have a controller that allows me to move around. It is, to use a technical term, cool.

The title is a metaphor for a method that Coover has elaborated throughout his career. In manuscripts of medieval European music, the notes were physically "pricked" or marked with holes or dots. The melody (the cantus firmus) could be ornamented or counterpointed with an extemporised part, known as the descant. It's common enough for musical terms to be used to describe narrative (theme, leitmotif and so on) but Coover's usage is more precise. The collection contains his most anthropologised story, "The Babysitter", which is told in a hundred or so paragraphs, each separated from its neighbours by white space. The cantus firmus is conventional. The babysitter arrives to look after two children. The parents go out. She spends the evening in their house. The parents come home. Coover's innovation is to produce descant-like variations on the possibilities of this scenario, possibilities that open up a grand guignol underworld of sex and violence beneath this suburban surface. The father fantasises about the girl. The girl's boyfriend and his buddy plan to come over and rape her. She plays with the little boy's penis as she gives him a bath. These events are not definitive. Contradictory possibilities exist simultaneously. The girl is raped and unraped. The father acts and does not act on his lascivious fantasies. The reader is expected to hold the story open, thereby exposing the mechanics of narrative for inspection. The effect is like the quantum-theoretical notion of "superposition", in which an unobserved particle exists in both of two possible

Born in Iowa in 1932, he studied at Indiana University, where he received a BA with a focus on Slavic studies. After a spell in the navy during the Korean war he began his literary career in the early 1960s, publishing stories in the *Evergreen Review*, edited by Barney Rosset of Grove Press, a champion of experimental writing who also worked with William Burroughs, Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, Hubert Selby Jr and Donald Barthelme. In 1966 Coover published his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, which deals with the rise of a religious cult centred on the survivor of a mining disaster. The New York Times noted sniftily that "Coover writes his first novel as if he doesn't expect to make it to a second. Everything goes in it including plots for several grim short stories and more social novels, and notes for a juicy essay." His second book, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), headed further away from conventional realism (and the comfort zone of the Times book page) with its plot about the creator of a baseball dice game who gradually becomes consumed by his make-believe league, to the point where he is unable to distinguish game from reality. But it was *Pricksongs & Descants*, Coover's 1969 short story collection, that cemented his reputation, standing today as one of the landmarks of postwar American fiction.

Immersive 3D is, in some ways, not an obvious form for a writer. These tools are usually used in industry for architectural visualisations – my one previous experience of a Cave was flying through a proposed Swedish container port. The unwieldiness of the system and the fundamental oddity of the project (what does it add to my experience of "The Library of Babel" to navigate through it in the form of waist-high type?) make this the sort of "blue sky" experimentation that is unlikely to lead to widely circulated results. It could be argued that the games industry now owns the territory of "non-linear narrative", with recent releases such as *La Noire* edging ever further into the territory of the novel. But this fascination with play, with formal experimentation and innovative platforms for fiction is typical of Coover, who has always been eager to push the limits of narrative, sometimes to breaking point.

states, before "collapsing" on to one or other possibility. The story ends with the mother exclaiming from the kitchen "Why, how nice! . . . The dishes are all done!" but also being told "your children are murdered, your husband gone, [there's] a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked".

In an essay on *Prikkings*, the novelist William Gass homes in on the way these "narrative slices" work like cards, giving "the impression that we might scoop them all up and reshuffle, altering not the elements but the order or the rules of play". As a child Coover made up "simple narrative-like games, played with dice or cards". This developed into an interest, not so much in chance process (like John Cage) but in the possibility of non-linear narrative architecture (closer to Julio Cortázar or BS Johnson), a concern that led directly to his more recent technological experiments. "By the time hypertext came along," he notes, "I was already well into it."

In the 60s, Coover experimented with marginal punchcards, a now-obsolete filing system using a series of peripheral holes, some cut clear to the edge of the card, so that when rods were slipped through the holes in a stack of cards, those cards which did not have that position punched out remained on the rod, while the target cards fell out of the stack. This meant the cards could be indexed in several ways, making it a sort of physical precursor to the idea of "tagging" a digital file. Coover used this system to develop a thesaurus, and tried to use it for fiction-writing, creating cards for characters and narrative elements in ways that sound similar to some of the techniques later used in role-playing and computer adventure games. The problem was, as he admits, that his fictional web of inter-relations rapidly became too dense. "It took a lot of effort. You think of a character, you develop information about that character, you start to punch it for something, it leads to another thought about the character, about another type of character, and suddenly you have 15 notes that you hadn't thought of before and none of them punched."

The fictions he developed with this system often used pre-existing material such as *The Arabian Nights* to provide a lexicon of elements from which to work. In 2005, McSweeney's published *A Child Again*, a collection which included a story in the form of playing cards, which had its origin in these early punchcard experiments. Does he feel his work relates to that of the French proto-surrealist Raymond Roussel, who in the years before the first world war generated works such as *Locus Solus* and *Impressions of Africa* using a highly artificial set of formal constraints based on homophonic puns? He agrees that he is interested in Roussel, but was never attracted to the idea of constraints as a way of generating stories. He talks about "having fun with the writing", and the formal manipulation of his source material appears to be more interesting to him than what he dismissively calls "angst writing", a term that seems to encompass most psychologically driven fiction, from Henry James to Jonathan Franzen. The use of fairytales and genre elements (recent novels spin out of noir, the western and pornography) are a way of freeing himself from the task of having to generate cards to shuffle.

He tells me a story that can serve as a sort of myth of origin. In the summer of 1960 he found himself on his own in Chicago, temporarily separated from his family. A nocturnal creature (he frequently works through the night), he was simultaneously reading Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and William Gaddis's monumental *The*

Recognitions. "I really loved *Augie March*. The opening section, at least. But somewhere in the middle of the book the experience totally transformed, I was really ticked off. It was bad and getting worse. And I was really catching on to *The Recognitions*. I took *Augie March* and threw it across the room, and that was the last I saw of it."

Why did realist fiction make him so angry? "I didn't think of it as realistic. It used modes of response to the world that had become stultified and so were easily communicated. I learned my realism from guys like Kafka." The idea that realism is a presumptuous name for a certain highly artificial literary mode has been floating around for at least half a century, yet its implications are still widely ignored. Postmodernism, as practised by Coover, is not simply a question of pointing out (tediously) to the reader that she is reading a novel. It's about a return to the novel's original, scandalous ability to create realities, rather than pretending to be a mirror or a movie camera. One section of *Pricksongs & Descants* is titled "Seven Exemplary Fictions", after the *Novelas Ejemplares* of Cervantes. In an introduction, Coover addresses the old master: "For your stories also exemplified the dual nature of all good narrative art: they struggled to synthesise the unsynthesisable, sallied forth against adolescent thought-modes and exhausted art forms, and returned home with new complexities."

Coover's greatest battle with complexity is *The Public Burning*, a massive novel about the McCarthy era and the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, which appeared, after much struggle, in 1977. Coover, whose work belies the idea that postmodernism is necessarily disengaged and apolitical, had been active in campaigning against the Vietnam war, and made a short film about a 1967 campus protest against Dow Chemical, *On a Confrontation in Iowa City*. The authoritarian drift of US politics led him first to write a satirical novella imagining a presidential campaign by Dr Seuss's Cat in the Hat (*A Political Fable*, 1968) and then to take a panoptical look at the anti-communist panic of the 50s. Conceived before Watergate and then completely rewritten in the wake of the scandal, *The Public Burning* is narrated by Richard Nixon, who struts and frets his way across a political stage dominated by a foul-mouthed, xenophobic Uncle Sam, who is locked in mortal combat with the Phantom, a shadowy and seemingly omnipresent enemy. We're now accustomed to fictionalisations of real events and people, but in the 70s, the use of real names was a dangerous novelty. Coover's publishers were wary, as the Rosenberg prosecutor Roy Cohn had recently filed suit against CBS over the way he was portrayed in a film. "There was a lot of terror about," Coover recalls. "There were no clear precedents. I had to hire a lawyer to help me negotiate those waters. At one point he said they're never going to publish this and the thing to do is set up a company and publish it yourself." *The Public Burning* was finally published, and indeed made the lower reaches of the New York Times bestseller list, but then was mysteriously pulled from the shelves. Coover suspects skulduggery, and the book never had the impact on the US political scene its author hoped.

Through the 70s, Coover was living in Britain, where his interest in the fairytale brought him into contact with Angela Carter, who became a close friend. "The folk tale is very subversive," he explains. "It's different from the mythic content of a society, which is from

the top down." Coover has little interest in archetypal explanations of myth and folk tales. He is more interested in breaking them open. As he wrote in the introduction to "Seven Exemplary Fictions", "The novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader . . . to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation."

Briar Rose, written in 1996, is probably the apogee of his engagement with the form, a hilarious series of descants on the Sleeping Beauty story. It is being republished by Penguin in a volume with *Spanking the Maid* (1982), which performs a similar operation on that most English of forms, 19th-century sadomasochistic pornography. Beauty and her prince, like the maid struggling to satisfy his exacting standards, are caught in short-circuited narrative loops that never resolve, but seem to wind down, decaying entropically until the stories come to a halt, not so much because they've ended in any "satisfactory" way, but because the wheels have fallen off. Fictional consummation (the sense of an ending) is frustrated. Coover's characters (who are mere functions of the story) are caught up in form, battling through thickets of narrative in the hope of fulfilling their desires. "That entrapment leads to all other forms of entrapment," he explains ironically. "Fiction is about a condition, not a process." Coover's stories are serious entertainments, devoted to play. As Cervantes put it, in his introduction to his own *Novelas Ejemplares*, "My intention has been to set up, in the midst of our community, a billiard-table, at which every one may amuse himself without hurt to body and soul."