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REQUIEM FOR A DREAM

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Hubert Selby Jr. - Requiem for a Dream

REQUIEM

FOR A

DREAM

A NOVEL BY HUBERT SELBY, JR.

THUNDER'S MOUTH PRESS

NEW YORK

*This book is dedicated, with
love, to Bobby, who has found
the only pound of pure--
Faith in a Loving God.*

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Foreword © 1988 by Richard Price

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FOREWORD

When I was in high school, I thought you had to be dead to be a novelist—dead, and from somewhere else: England, the Midwest, France.

One of the more profound, if peripheral, epiphanies hitting me upon reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby, Jr., was that my working-class

Bronx world was valid material for Art; that the voices, the streets, the gestures that I knew so well were as human, as precious, and as honorable as any found through the centuries and civilizations of literature.

Which is to say that I set down *Last Exit to Brooklyn* with the terrifying realization that if I had the will and the talent to go with the eye and ear, I could grow up to be a writer. It wasn't until I was much older that I realized that talent and material mean nothing without something else that Selby possesses and projects on every page of every book he has written: Love—a forgiveness and compassion that elevate all the bottom dogs that populate his world, the lost, the depraved, these coldblooded, and the insensate. His art is his ability to humanize the seemingly inhuman, and by extension to humanize the reader.

No one can convey the visceral experience of the suffering of people like Selby—the cruel hallucinations of grace, of peace, of love, of Easy Street; the wracking ache of junk sickness; the choking rage of parental/marital/sexual claustrophobia; the tightening screws of paranoid delusion; the pathetic grandiosity of walk-around dreams; and the dread of the inevitable dawn. Selby burrows under the skin and into the brains of the urban underclass to deliver infernal monologues seething with tragically skewered delusions, short-term ecstasies, and obsessive furies that crash and boil across the page, ceaselessly. At his best, he can literally stun us into empathy. *Requiem for a Dream* tracks the destruction of four people—three young, and one older. Here, Selby reports from the marrow of those addicted: to dope, to hope, to tragically childish visions of heaven on earth. Even as its characters ascend to the heights, their nightmarish plummet can be foreseen, but this file:///D:/Documents and Settings/René/Bureau/Blad/Selby/SELBY_JR.,_Hubert_-_Requiem For A Dream.html (2 of 132)9-4-2005 20:39:44

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foreknowledge doesn't protect the reader from experiencing the almost unbearable suffering, the degradation and oblivion, that is the price of dreams among the powerless. *Requiem for a Dream* is quintessential Selby, fueled by moments which make the reader feel like the unwilling newscaster witnessing the *Hindenburg* disaster who sobbed, "Oh, the

humanity!" It is Selby's gift to us that once again we find ourselves aching for his people—which is to say we find ourselves loving the unlovable.

—Richard Price

New York City

January 1988

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

Requiem for a Dream was originally published in 1978. It is extremely gratifying to know that it is still in print and going into another edition. Also, it is being made into a film, production scheduled to start the middle of April this year. So the book still lives and breathes (as do I). For me there is something beautiful and ironic in the fact that all this is happening now, during a time of

"unparalleled prosperity." The Great American Dream is coming true for many. Obviously, I believe that to pursue the American Dream is not only futile but self-destructive because ultimately it destroys everything and everyone involved with it. By definition it must, because it nurtures everything except those things that are important: integrity, ethics, truth, our very heart and soul. Why? The reason is simple: because Life/life is giving, not getting.

I am not suggesting we need to give everything to the poor and homeless—the millions of them who are still here in the midst of plenty—put on a hair shirt and go through the streets with a begging bowl. This, in and of itself, is no more nurturing than the pursuit of "getting." I am not afraid of money and what it can buy. I would love to have a house full of stuff—of course I would need a house first. I have been hungry and see nothing noble in hunger. Neither do I see anything noble in eating high on the hog though eating is certainly better. But to believe that getting stuff is the purpose and aim of life is madness.

It seems to me that we all have a dream of our own, our own personal vision, our own individual way of giving, but for many reasons we are

afraid to pursue it, or to even recognize and accept its existence. But to deny our vision is to sell our soul. Getting is living a lie, turning our back on the truth, and Visions are glimpses of the truth: Obviously nothing external can truly nurture my inner life, my Vision. What happens when I turn my back on my Vision and spend my time and energy getting the stuff of the American Dream? I become agitated, uncomfortable in my own skin, because the guilt of abandoning my "Self/self," of deserting my Vision, forces me to apologize for my existence, to need to prove myself

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by approaching life as if it's a competition. I have to keep getting stuff in an attempt to appease and satisfy that vague sense of discontent that worms its way through me. Certainly not everyone will experience this torment, but enough do and have no idea what is wrong. I'm sure the psychologists have a term for this free-floating anxiety, but the cause is what is destroying us, not the classification. There are always millions who seem to get away with doing the things that we think abominable, and thrive. It certainly appears that way. Yet I know, absolutely, from my experience, that there are no free lunches in this life, and eventually we all have to accept full and total responsibility for our actions, everything we have done, and have not done.

This book is about four individuals who pursued The American Dream, and the results of their pursuit. They did not know the difference between the Vision in their hearts and the illusion of the American Dream. In pursuing the lie of illusion, they made it impossible to experience the truth of their Vision. As a result everything of value was lost.

Unfortunately, I suspect there never will be a requiem for the Dream, simply because it will destroy us before we have the opportunity to mourn its passing. Perhaps time will prove me wrong. As Mr. Hemingway said: "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

—Hubert Selby, Jr.

Los Angeles

1999

FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

I was a public school kid from Brooklyn facing my first exams during freshman year of college, and I was terrified. High school was a joke. The only thing I learned was how to get away with cutting class. So, when college came around I wasn't very prepared. I hit the library and tried to learn. But Selby fucked everything up.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the word "Brooklyn." Now when you're from Brooklyn and you see anything related to Brooklyn you're immediately interested. I pulled a worn copy of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* off the shelf. This was before the movie, and I had no clue what I was holding. From sentence one I was done, and so were my finals. I blew them off and I read. I read and I read and I screamed and I connected and I recited and I rejoiced. This was storytelling. This was understanding. This was a deep yet simple examination of what makes us human. I now knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to tell stories.

Storytelling took me to L.A. and film school. Before school started they told us to prepare three short scripts for projects to be executed during the year. So, I figured I should read short stories from my favorite authors. That led me to Selby's "Fortune Cookie," which I shot right away. The story follows the [file:///D:/Documents and Settings/René/Bureaublad/Selby/SELBY_JR.,_Hubert_-_Requiem For A Dream.html](file:///D:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Ren%C3%A9/Bureaublad/Selby/SELBY_JR.,_Hubert_-_Requiem%20For%20A%20Dream.html) (4 of 132)9-4-2005 20:39:44

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rise and fall of a door-to-door salesman who gets addicted to the fortunes in fortune cookies. After film school I figured it was time to make a feature, so I turned to novels of my favorite authors. I found *Requiem for a Dream* in a book store on Venice Beach. I was excited to start it. I did, but I never finished it. Not because it wasn't good. Rather, the novel was so violently honest and arresting that I couldn't handle it.

It was on my shelf for a long time. Then, years later, my producer Eric Watson was heading off for a ski trip with his family in Colorado. He needed something to read, and he grabbed the book off my shelf and asked if he could borrow it. When he returned he said *Requiem, for a Dream* ruined his vacation and that I must finish it. I did, and I knew we had to make it next.

This book is about a lot of things. Mostly it's about love. More specifically it's about what happens when love goes wrong.

When it was time to write the script I rented an apartment in South Brooklyn, out by Coney Island. The novel had amazing structure and it translated very well into three acts. But something was strange. While breaking it down I realized that whenever something good was supposed to happen to a character, something bad happened. Because of this, I couldn't figure out who the hero of the novel was. After sketching out all the character arcs I realized they were all upside down. So I flipped them over, and suddenly I had a "Eureka!" The hero wasn't Sara, it wasn't Harry, not Tyrone, not Marion. The hero was the characters' enemy: Addiction. The book is a manifesto on Addiction's triumph over the Human Spirit. I began to look at the film as a monster movie. The only difference is that the monster doesn't have physical form. It only lives deep in the characters' heads. Ellen Burstyn, who knocked it out of the park as Sara Goldfarb, told me Hinduism has two main gods—

Shiva and Kali. Shiva is the god of creation and Kali is the god of destruction. They exist as a team. One cannot exist without the other. Just like the Christian God and the Devil. Good and evil. There is a balance. Selby writes about Kali. He writes about the darkness.

It is in this darkness where Selby flips on his flashlight and searches for our humanity. It is that tiny but priceless diamond of love lost in a universe of evil that he cherishes. And by leading us to it he reveals everything—our beauty and our vanity, our strength and our weaknesses. He shows us what makes us tick, what makes us hate and what makes us love. He reveals what it is to be human. I needed to make a film from this novel because the words burn off the page. Like a hangman's noose, the words scorch your neck with rope burn and drag you into the sub-sub-basement we humans

build beneath hell. Why do we do it? Because we choose to live the dream instead of choosing to live the life. You won't ever forget this read.

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—Darren Aronofsky May 1, 2000

Except the LORD build the house,

they labor in vain that build it. ...

Psalm 127:1

Trust in the LORD with all thine

heart; and lean not unto thine

own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Proverbs 3:5,6

Harry locked his mother in the closet. Harold. Please. Not again the TV. Okay, okay, Harry opened the door, then stop playin games with my head. He started walking across the room toward the television set. And dont bug me. He yanked the plug out of the socket and disconnected the rabbit ears. Sara went back into the closet and closed the door. Harry stared at the closet for a moment. So okay, stay. He started to push the set, on its stand, when it stopped with a jerk, the set almost falling. What the hells goin on here? He looked down and saw a bicycle chain going from a steel eye on the side of the set to the radiator. He stared at the closet. Whatta ya tryin to do, eh? Whats with this chain? You tryin to get me to break my own mothers set? or break the radiator?—she sat mutely on the closet floor— an maybe blow up the whole house? You tryin to make me a killer? Your own son? your own flesh and blood?