

**Book Review by Richard Gehr**

This article was originally printed in The Village Voice, reprinted by permission of the author. Richard Gehr writes for The Village Voice, Guitar Player, and other magazines, on music and culture. He lives in Brooklyn but grew up on the Oregon Coast.

Trickster Makes This World:  
Mischief, Myth, and Art  
By Lewis Hyde  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26

It's nearly impossible to consider the Trickster without getting a rush of pleasure from the unadulterated sense of Possibility he suggests. Trickster is the cosmic fly in the ointment. Embodied as Hermes or Mercury in Western mythology, as Loki for the Vikings, as Eshu or Legba in West Africa and Haiti, or as Coyote among the Navajo, Trickster is an intensely rich and evocative figure noted for his (except in the few matrilineal cultures where it's "her") formidable appetites and a PREDILECTION for boundary-crossing. A cultural hero with a thousand faces, Trickster is the amoral "creative idiot, the wise fool" who shuttles between heaven and earth conveying sacrifices upward and bringing back DOWN such technologies as fire, trapping nets, divination. He is the thieving god of crossroads and travel, of darkness on the edge of town, of blues, voodoo, and the abstract truth. HE IS EVEN WILE E. COYOTE, A CRAFTY LOSER DOOMED TO BLOW HIMSELF TO BITS IN EVERY ROADRUNNER CARTOON.

Lewis Hyde, in this sprawling, OFTEN POETIC follow-up to his highly regarded The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, suggests that a society without Tricksters is a society doomed for the dumpster of history. Hyde, in Trickster Makes the World, nimbly and often dazzlingly unravels the psychological hard wiring that makes the Trickster myths necessary for cultures to adapt and survive. Not only does Hyde demonstrate "how social life can depend on treating antisocial characters as part of the sacred", but he suggests that the Trickster mentality parallels our incessant yearnings for transcendence.

Strictly speaking, it takes a polytheistic culture to create a Trickster. Today, however, most of us live in polycultural societies beholden to a single god or less. So of what use is a quicksilver messenger like the Greek god Hermes, asks Hyde, in a world where winged travel is the rule rather than the exception? Which is to ask: Is there any place for the Trickster in contemporary American life?

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, I was always fascinated by the mischievous stories about Coyote and Crow told by the Coos, Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indian-- though not quite so profoundly as my run-ins with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, archetype-dissolving goofballs representing a strange new tribe. Trickster is a hungry and lusty but incessantly inventive creature who gets down and dirty in order to reveal the universal. So if Kesey and Neal Cassady's coast-to-coast dissemination of LSD, cosmic humor, aleatoric arts, and on/off-the-bus rhetoric don't sketch the latest culture-hero Tricksterism to a T, I'm a Signifying Monkey.

Hyde doesn't mention the Merry Pranksters, although they fit neatly at the end of the Trickster lineage; they were about spectacle, performance, and Pop Art, while Hyde is more interested in the other sort of high art. The foundation of Trickster Makes the World is Hyde's translation and interpretation of "The Homeric Hymn to Hermes." Probably written during the sixth century BC, the "Hymn to Hermes" opens the doors to a timeless space in which the invention of sacrifice through deferred appetite neatly abuts both psychoanalysis and artistic modernism. A CRAPPING, farting antagonist to Apollo's orthodoxy, Hermes sweet-talks his way into "glamorous" Olympus by lying shamelessly and inventing the lyre (with which he appeases and seduces Apollo). Hermes's lies and sacrifices are floating signifiers that suggest the symbolic invention of language (while his comely profile and winged feet today encourage contemporary prevaricators to say it with flowers).

Other cultures' Tricksters are no less subtly inventive, and HYDE'S BOOK brims with evocative and multilayered stories of their quirky, inscrutable, and often Rabelaisian doings. The Navajos' Coyote, for example, invents the traps in which he subsequently loses himself. Norse mythology's Loki brings on Ragnarok, the Asgardian apocalypse, so that the

Earth may be reborn. Japan's Susa-no-o dirties the palace, thereby allowing fruit and vegetable seeds to sprout freely. And China's Monkey King crashes the royal party and steals the peaches of immortality.

Equally poetic and scholarly, Trickster reads like an epic world dream that flows seamlessly between the personal (Hyde's own tales of travel and loss), political, literary, and mythic. The Monkey King's theft of the peaches of immortality, for example, prefaces a book-ending disquisition on James Baldwin's prophetic admission that "all Black men have toward all white men an attitude which is designed, really, either to rob the white man of the jewel of his naivete, or else to make it cost him dear". Hyde regards the frequently self-contradicting Trickster myths as an ongoing DEBATE CONCERNING what society is willing to integrate (and hence domesticate), cast away, or simply tolerate. He reads the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave as the words of a translator and traitor whose moments of trickster consciousness -- Douglass was at the same time a slave and free, black and white -- had a profound effect ON THE NATION but an ambiguous personal upshot when a domesticated Douglass eventually transcended such dualities.

Although Hyde FLOATS the notion of the confidence man as the closest thing we have to an American Trickster figure, his heart doesn't seem in it. He's more interested in how writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Richard Rodriguez, artists like Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, and the composer John Cage have used Trickster strategies of revelation, paradox, and chance to dilate the hidden pores in the mundane and unveil the plenitude that lies beyond it. As intermediary between mortals and gods, between Here and There, Hyde's Trickster IS a crafty "joint worker" equally adept at both destroying and rearticulating. "The Monkey of the Mind," writes Hyde, "knows that human beings had a hand in articulating the world they inhabit and so knows that human beings can remake it when they need to. To wake that Monkey is to wake the possibility of playing with the joints of creation, the possibility of art".

Hyde views art as a form of divination. (Hermes's particular method of divination, cledomancy -- divining through accidental but portentous remarks -- clearly anticipates psychoanalysis.) Picasso and Duchamp transformed chance discoveries into the modernist masterpieces, while Cage cultivated inattention and, writes Hyde, "cast his lot with perturbation". Kingston and Rodriguez do much of their work in the INTERSTICES separating cultural identities, generations, and race. Not necessarily Tricksters themselves, they use Trickster tropes to exteriorize inner conflict and shame, destroying the old world in order to ADAPT to the new. Tricksters like Allen Ginsberg, on the other hand, become prophetic through sheer shamelessness, transforming his mother's madness and his father's homophobia into sublime self-exposure.

Perhaps it's Trickster's inherent messiness that makes him most troubling for cultures such as our own. Tricksters such as Hermes and Susa-no-o are perfectly comfortable with detritus. But, as Hyde shows through the examples of Andrew Serrano's Piss Christ, Robert Mapplethorpe's whip handles, and their attendant controversies, we are a culture deeply divided as to what is clean and dirty. Mass-media Tricksters from Bugs Bunny to Bart Simpson have been sanitized for our protection, while movements from the Situationists to Punks rise only to be subsumed back into consumerist hegemony. Was it ever thus? Yes and no. The beauty we make will perish," concludes Hyde, "but not the world from which we make it, nor the wit to do the making". WHICH I READ AS SUGGESTING THAT THAT DAMNED WILE E. COYOTE MAY HAVE MORE TO SAY TO US THAN WE GIVE HIM CREDIT FOR.

**A Walk in the Jag Wood**

Continued from page 1

Suddenly, I found myself just entering the zoo with my parents. It was like deja vu. My parents asked me if I wanted to go to the polar bear exhibit. I said "No Way!" And ran straight for the jaguar exhibit. I wanted to look for the jaguar that I saw in my dream. At the exhibit, a jaguar spoke to me! And said, "Thank you so much for warning me about Duke Grover." There was a small sign on the jaguar exhibit that said:

Free! Jaguar Kittens  
Need Good Homes  
Please ask the Zoo Keepers  
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So we decided to get the kitten that spoke to me. Now she is my little advisor.

Say "Hi," Laura.



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