

# Book probes paradoxes; sad-funny, decent-decadent

By Scott Kleager

"You only go around once in life. . ." says the television commercial. Most of us would like to believe that, but judging by the cautious way we conduct our lives, deep down nearly all of us cling to the idea that somehow if we take it easy, our lives just may last forever. But there is a rare brand of humanoid out there that really lives like there is no tomorrow.

Bart Darling, a main character in John Nichols' new novel *A Ghost in the Music*,

## book review

exemplifies this kind of person.

A fast-moving, capitalist who's rich as dirt, big, handsome and strong as a bull, Bart is a 47-year-old Hollywood stuntman and grade-B movie producer. With a Mercedes, a big Harley and plenty of money to go along with it, Bart Darling (as his name implies) is a society girl's dream.

*A Ghost in the Music* is a weaving of paradoxes around Darling. First paradox: Bart lives like there's no tomorrow. He rarely sleeps, drives like a maniac, and displays bursts of energy that would leave a 4-year-old in awe. But, even though he lives as though he must do everything soon or miss something before the end, he insists that he'll never die.

**SECOND PARADOX:** Bart, of course, has always been a womanizer, whenever and with whomever he wants. But at the start of the novel, we learn that he has fallen in love with a skinny, poor, average-looking country and western singer. Lorraine, the singer, is tough and determined to make it on her own in the music business. Bart could easily be her ticket. She is morally responsible, but he is not.

The contrasts go on and on. Suffice it to say that not only is she different from any other woman Bart has "loved," but she is actually his own antithesis.

Third paradox: Bart's illegitimate son, Marcel, who is narrator of the story, loves his father and at the same time hates him. Marcel's mother is a Communist who raises Marcel in an atmosphere of stark ideological reality. No television, stereos or fancy clothes. Bart, on the other hand, is the ideal American capitalist, imperializing anyone who wants his cash.

**DURING MARCEL'S** childhood he periodically visits his father and eventually falls in love with his lavish lifestyle. But as Marcel becomes an adult he realizes that his father is killing himself living as he does and begins to hate him.

Nichols is excellent at combining character construction and theme. He uses actions to form characters and characters to create themes that bounce off each other like pool balls at the break.

Lorraine and Bart constantly fight but love each other in a way inversely proportional to their actions. Bart's lifestyle constantly clashes with Marcel's Communist upbringing, paving the way for the author's brilliantly constructed, believable ideological conversations between the two men. This aspect of writing is difficult to accomplish but Nichols does it better than most. After reading this novel, one is tempted to say that he may be one of the best at it.

Stylistically, it's no surprise that *A Ghost in the Music* is a combination of opposites, being both funny and sad. Nichols' sense of humor offsets the sad content of the novel. Even the picture of the author on the back cover would make the most dull of critics smirk.

It appears that Nichols' truth could be objectively bipolar. He seems to say that in nearly everyone, everything and every action, there are paradoxes.

With a statement such as *A Ghost in the Music* John Nichols sets himself above most of America's young writers by his realistic portrayal of life.

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