

'Blank' Verse

Richard Hell casts off his 'punk' past in favor of a 'Godlike' literary future.

BY KATHERINE TURMAN

For subway or airplane reading material, *Godlike* may not be the best choice, despite its considerable literary merits. Even its author realizes it's the kind of novel that makes people feel, "Gosh, I hope no one is reading over my shoulder." Richard Hell laughs at his observation. The Kentucky born, New York-weaned wordsmith — who left "punk" rock behind decades ago for edgy literature — knows well that the subject matter and "general obnoxiousness" of his second novel made it difficult to find a publisher, and may likewise hamper its finding a wide audience.

When Hell is asked what *Godlike* is about, he'll admittedly try to duck the question: "I will say it's about this intense love affair between two poets. I might elaborate a little more and say it's a guy in a hospital remembering his youthful love affair."

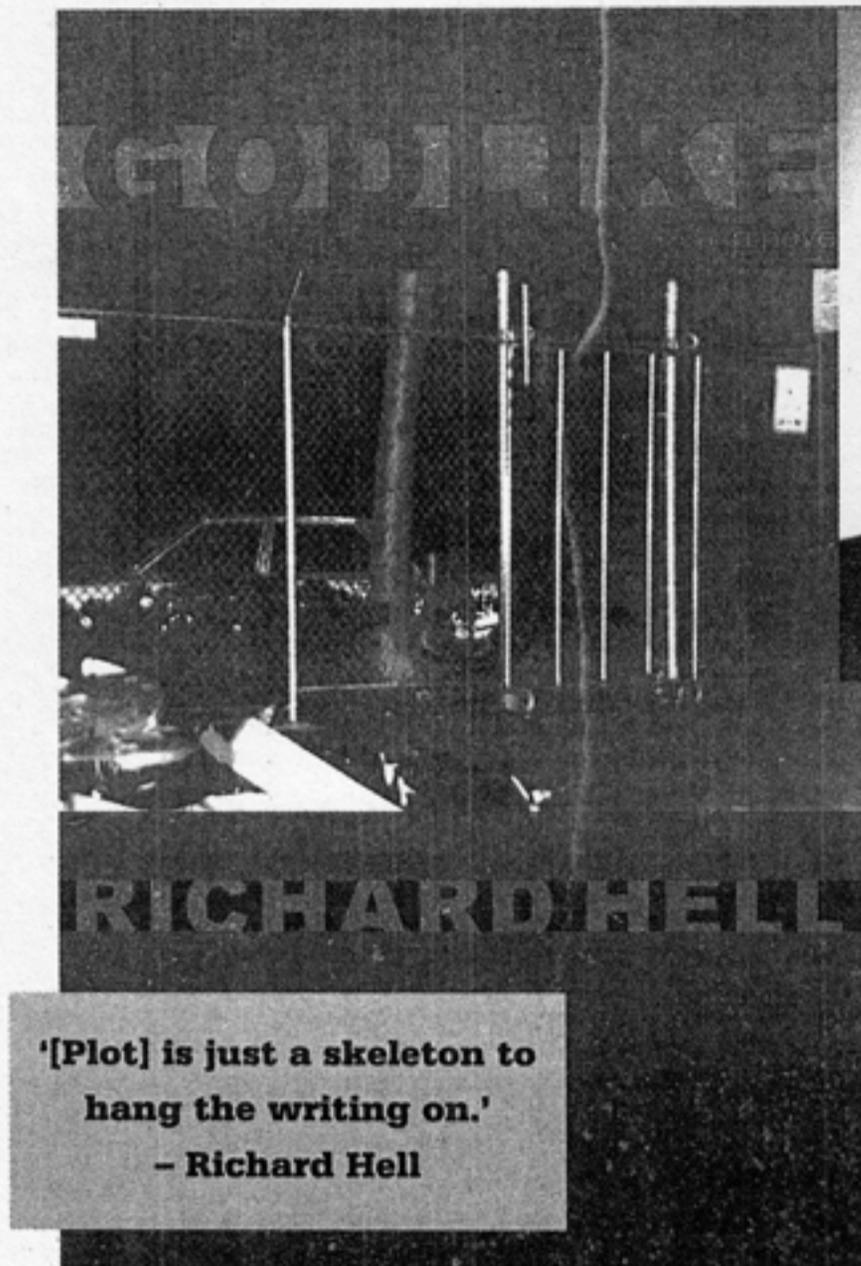
Even the book cover doesn't reveal the fact that *Godlike* is actually a dysfunctional love story between a 27-year-old man and a 16-year-old boy, set in the gritty, early '70s New York poetry scene, full of sound, fury and, of course, drugs. And a pregnant wife. And poetry. It's a fictional story about Paul Vaughan — the elder poet, hospitalized in 1997, looking back on his youthful exploits and explorations with one Randall Terence Wode, or "T," as described in a "memoir-novelette" style. Hell based the beautifully tortured relationship between the cocky teenage poet and his older admirer loosely on the lives of Verlaine and Rimbaud.

Godlike comes nine years after Hell's debut novel, *Go Now*. And in the interim, Hell did "a fair amount of research on a non-fiction book about the Vietnam-era writer Gustav Hasford." Ultimately disenchanted with his subject, that tome never came to fruition, but Hell says he retained and ultimately succeeded in his goal of "writing a book as different as my first book as possible." Hell was somewhat perturbed that people viewed *Go Now* as autobiographical, and was bothered that some felt it didn't take "imagination or ability" to write about one's own life.

Hence *Godlike*. As for making the characters homosexual? Hell muses for a few moments. "The gay part... I can't remember. Basically, I didn't have a plot. That's not that important to me. [Plot] is just a skeleton to hang the writing on. It's really secondary."

To wit, the paragraph that gives the book its title: "...T. and Paul fantasized about this, imagining themselves as godlike philosopher poets encouched in the advanced civilization, languorously sipping their fermented grain as they spun ideas and mental-sensual constructions of life-language in the air for the pleasure of their own delectation."

Hell's writing is visceral and lyrical as were — past tense — his lyrics. The once-scrawny singer may have retired from spewing on stage to a drunken crowd, but



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his magnetism is still nonetheless palpable on page and in person. "All my books are pretty funky and in your face," Hell explains, which also holds true of his music with the band Television, the Heartbreakers and especially with the late '70s Voidoids, thanks to songs such as the seminal "Love Comes in Spurts." Yet as his literary career burgeons, Hell is attempting to close the chapter on his musical life, saying of the newly released 21-cut *Spurts* on Rhino Records: "Now I can walk away and not look back."

It's been 20 years since Hell played a full set with a band. "I did three songs with Dim Stars at a Sonic Youth gig in 1992, I think. Everything was completely out of tune," he recalls.

By 1990, he had already set his sights and computer to a serious literary path and is still grappling with the world's view of his career to date. "It's frustrating to have every-

body talk about me as a musician when they write about my book," he observes thoughtfully, choosing his words with care. "It always has to be brought up, and it will seem like the writer is treating [the book] differently than they might if I didn't have any history as a musician. That's kind of maddening, though I think the books are strong enough that that will fade."

He's shrewd enough to understand and accept the benefits, though: "There's no denying that there are places the books get talked about that it wouldn't otherwise. As a musician, it used to bug me that people would always talk about me as the author of 'Blank Generation,' which is maybe the second song I ever wrote in a 10-year career as a musician. I finally came to terms with that. And if you're talking about the mass media way you're regarded superficially by people who just know your name, almost always people get identified with the first

thing that brought you to public attention as an artist. Like Jack Kerouac wrote *On The Road*. But if you keep plugging away, it's possible to get past that."

And plug he will. Though he's way over the touring band life, Hell doesn't mind doing readings to promote *Godlike*, while acknowledging that it's more nerve-racking than playing music: "You don't have any kind of props; no cushion between you and the audience. In a band, you have all this noise, and it's collaborative. But when you're reading from your own works you're really exposed." Plus, he confesses, laughing, "It's also kind of boring. I'm tending to talk to the audience as much as I read, because it seems such an artificial situation; why should you insert your voice to the reader's head, rather than them reading the book themselves, which is more true to the intention of the work."

As *Godlike* finds its audience, Hell doesn't have the next ace up his sleeve. His general goal is always to "come up with projects that will really engage me and be as stimulating as they possibly can be, that will require everything of me and more." "It's hard work," he continues, "but it's exhilarating. I'm fairly confident that as long as I keep plugging away, I'm going to get something that will make me happy."

It's one-day-at-a-time work for Hell the author, who had no real idea how *Godlike* was going to end until it did. And that's fine by him. "That's part of what's really exciting about writing these books," he concludes. "I'm really curious every morning to find out what's going to happen." ■

October 1, *Beyond Baroque*, 681 Venice Blvd. (310) 822-3006. Full reading and signing, 7:30pm, \$7, with Darren Klein. October 2, *West Hollywood Book Fair*, 647 N. San Vicente Blvd. 2:30. October 3, *Book Soup*, 8818 Sunset Blvd. (310) 659-3110, short reading and signing at 7 p.m.