

ROBERT COOVER

Robert Coover (1932 –) is American writer of avant-garde fiction, plays, poetry, and essays whose experimental forms and techniques mix reality and illusion, frequently creating otherworldly and surreal situations and effects.

Coover attended Southern Illinois University, Indiana University (B.A., 1953) and the University of Chicago (M.A., 1965). He taught at several universities, notably Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where he was a professor of creative writing from 1979 to 2012.

His first, and most conventional, novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), tells of the rise and eventual disintegration of a religious cult. The protagonist of *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.* (1968) creates an imaginary baseball league in which fictitious players take charge of their own lives. Written in the voice of Richard Nixon and satirizing the national mood of the early 1950s, *The Public Burning* (1976) is what Coover called a “factional account” of the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Among his other works are *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* (1987), which casts Nixon as a simpleminded and lascivious football player during the 1930s in a work that skewers the superficial 20th-century notions of the “American Dream”; *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991); *John’s Wife* (1996); *Ghost Town* (1998); *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Director’s Cut* (2002), the tale of an idolized pornographic-film actor who lives in a society of limitless sexual extravagance; and *Noir* (2010), Coover’s metafictional take on the hard-boiled detective story. His later novels included *The Brunist Day of Wrath* (2014), a sequel to *The Origin of the Brunists*, and *Huck Out West* (2017), which centers on Mark Twain’s classic fictional characters Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.

Coover’s short-story collection *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969) established him as a major figure in postwar American writing, and several of his stories were adapted for theatrical performance, including “The Babysitter” (film 1995), his most-anthologized work, and “Spanking the Maid.” In 2002 he published *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)*, a collection of 10 poetic vignettes derived from Joseph Cornell’s assemblages. Coover explored children’s literature through *Stepmother* (2004), an illustrated modern fairy tale for adults, and *A Child Again* (2005), a collection of grotesque retellings of childhood tales.

Coover’s often avant-garde work was far from commercially successful, but he had a vast influence on a generation of postmodern writers, including David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Rick Moody.

During his long career, Coover only wrote four plays, all of which have previously been directed by Ron Sossi at the Odyssey. In 1974, an evening of Coover plays collectively titled “Holy Shoot” included *The Kid*, *Love Scene* and *Rip Awake*—the latter starring Sossi in the title role. In 1977, the Odyssey’s “An Evening of Dirty Religious Plays” included Coover’s *A Theological Position*.