

The 16th Second: The Wild Life and Crazy Times of Colt Michael—What Really Happened

Ted A. Richard

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The 16th Second is the inspiring memoir of a stripper who became an activist.

Ted A. Richard's encouraging memoir *The 16th Second* concerns his work as a stripper during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as his experiences with alcoholism.

In his youth, Richard was a popular student. He was also closeted. By his twenties, he had found work as a dancer in Texas gay bars. Though his book covers his chases for pleasure and fame, and mourns losses that came because of alcohol and cocaine use, it also celebrates his achievements: Richard won numerous awards as his alter ego, Colt Michael. And even after being diagnosed with HIV in 1987, he continued to gain acclaim and notoriety as a dancer across Louisiana and Texas.

But Richard's rambunctious, fun outward appearance belied his melancholy mindset. He recounts how many of his friends died of AIDS, suicide, and overdoses. Eventually, he surrendered to the idea that he would die in a similar manner. He was often lonely: "everyone wanted to be with Colt Michael, but nobody wanted to be with Ted A. Richard." When his HIV became AIDS in 1994, he realized that "those 'seconds of fame' were actually 'seconds of shame.'" A return to his parents' home in Louisiana enabled him to begin treatment for the illness, though he was still entrenched in alcoholism. Many years and DUIs later, he achieved sobriety, beginning a second life in charity work.

Each of the book's first fifteen chapters details a "second of fame," or a memorable and formative moment that moved Richard in a dangerous direction. The "sixteenth second" comes after he writes about retiring as Colt Michael and beginning HIV treatment. A suggestion that life is at its fullest after a person's "fifteen seconds of fame" are over dominates, complemented by the clear record of how Richard's fame led him down a path of destruction. This work is amplified by the book's friendly and familiar tone: the book flaunts Richard's endless charm to its benefit.

Distinctive sensory details make the scenes all the more intimate, amplifying their ranging feelings of joy and sorrow. Richard's sense of despair after receiving a diagnosis that he'd come to regard as inevitable is tangible. So, too, is his ecstatic disbelief at winning second place in the Texas Male Stripper of the Year contest. Still, there is repeating information, particularly in the book's closing section of free form poetry, that undermines this otherwise endearing work.

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AIMÉE JODOIN (May 4, 2022)

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