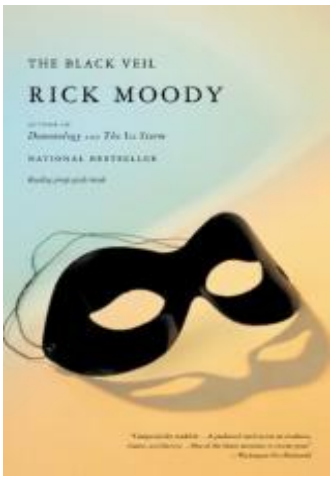
The Black Veil: A Memoir With Digressions

by Rick Moody



About the Book

While still in his twenties, Rick Moody found that a decade of alcohol, drugs, and other indulgences had left him stranded in a depression so severe that he feared for his life. The road of excess led, for him, not to the palace of wisdom but rather to a psychiatric hospital in one of New York's least exalted boroughs.

The Black Veil is Rick Moody's account of that debilitating passage in his life. It is the powerfully written story of a mind unraveling, and of how it feels when the underpinnings of life fall away. The anxieties of early adulthood, of first finding a place in the world?the weight placed upon that first relationship, first job, first apartment?are presented here with enormous sympathy. Anyone who has ever felt his or her own psychological footing slip, even briefly, will find Moody's account of his breakdown and return both harrowing and heartbreaking.

At the same time, **The Black Veil** is an astonishing exploration of guilt, blame, the public face, and the very idea of self. Looking for clues to his lifelong sense of melancholy and shame, and recognizing signs of this same condition in his family's paternal line, Moody embarked on a search for its origins. This quest begins with fathers ("Fathers refold maps, fathers like to appear as though they have infallible knowledge of direct routes between any two points") and grandfathers ("The idea here is that you have to do the heavy lifting first"). It ventures through stone quarries in Connecticut, among mossy tombstones in Maine, into the coded diary of a tormented Puritan minister, and into the life and writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In these and dozens of other places, Moody finds gleaming pieces of the past, and he weaves of them an inspired portrait of what it means to be young and confused, older and confused, guilty, lost, and finally healed.

Funny, sad, and blazingly inventive, **The Black Veil** is another work of audacious originality by one of the most thoughtful writers of our time.

Discussion Guide

1. The secrets encoded in lineage are essential to Rick Moody's examination of himself in **The Black Veil**. How does the author's desire for connection with his father and grandfather relate to his desire for a genealogical link to Handkerchief Moody?

2. The veil is one of the book's most salient symbols. What does it stand for? Identify various veils that we use today and describe our purposes in using them; for example, to conceal our shame, or to keep ourselves apart from others.

3. The Black Veil details a history of suffering ? not just Rick Moody's own depression and alcoholism, but the difficulties of his ancestors, family members, friends, and lovers. Why do you think that suffering, a condition familiar to all people, so frequently breeds loneliness and alienation?

4. How is **The Black Veil** different from other memoirs you've read? Discuss the author's intent in embracing both style and subject matter that are unusual by the genre's standards.

5. What do you make of the author's incorporation of Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the first truly American canonical writers, into the book? Is Rick Moody recognizing his debt to Hawthorne? Positioning himself as one of Hawthorne's literary heirs? Neither? Both?

6. What do the book's structure and narrative style say about Rick Moody's identity, and the way in which we all forge our identities? Do we discover ourselves in fits and starts, by accident?

7. What do you suspect was behind Rick Moody's decision to write a memoir after writing many works of fiction? Do you think that writing an autobiographical work can lead to a deeper knowledge of yourself? Do you think it's a catharsis?

8. Rick Moody's distinctive style sets him apart from most other contemporary writers. In fact, many people have said his writing more closely resembles poetry or music than conventional prose. What do you think? Are there any artists, musicians, poets, or other writers whose work you would compare to Rick Moody's?

9. Melancholy and alcoholism are two of the oldest literary associations ? from the dark clouds following Shakespearean characters to the notoriety of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. In what ways does Moody's account of his experiences with depression and addiction comment on the vast heritage that he is becoming a part of? Does he come to any conclusions?

10. Rick Moody has suggested that, rather than "a memoir," **The Black Veil** is: "A book. A think. An encyclopedia. A catalogue. A brushfire. A building collapse. A think tank. A prose poem. A deed of sale. A crie de coeur. A lost cause. A dampened enthusiasm. A night of the living dead. A soldiering on. An all-hopes-lost. A listing to one side. A breath of fresh air. A crown of thorns. A land of enchantments. An American notebook." What justifies describing the book in this fashion? How is **The Black Veil** a work that evades categorization?

Author Bio

Rick Moody is the author of two memoirs --- THE LONG ACCOMPLISHMENT and the award-winning THE BLACK VEIL --- the novels HOTELS OF NORTH AMERICA, THE FOUR FINGERS OF DEATH, THE DIVINERS, PURPLE AMERICA, THE ICE STORM and GARDEN STATE, and multiple collections of short fiction. Moody is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and his work has been anthologized in *Best American Stories*, *Best American Essays* and the Pushcart Prize anthology. He lives in Rhode Island.

Critical Praise

Michael Chabon, Pulitzer Prize winning author of **The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay** and **Wonder Boys** "In this journey beyond addiction and recovery, back through family memories and taller ancestral tales into the deeper mysteries of that American disorder for which no program of cure yet exists, Rick Moody, writing with boldness, humor, generosity of spirit, and a welcome sense of wrath, takes the art of the memoir an important step into its future."Thomas Pynchon

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