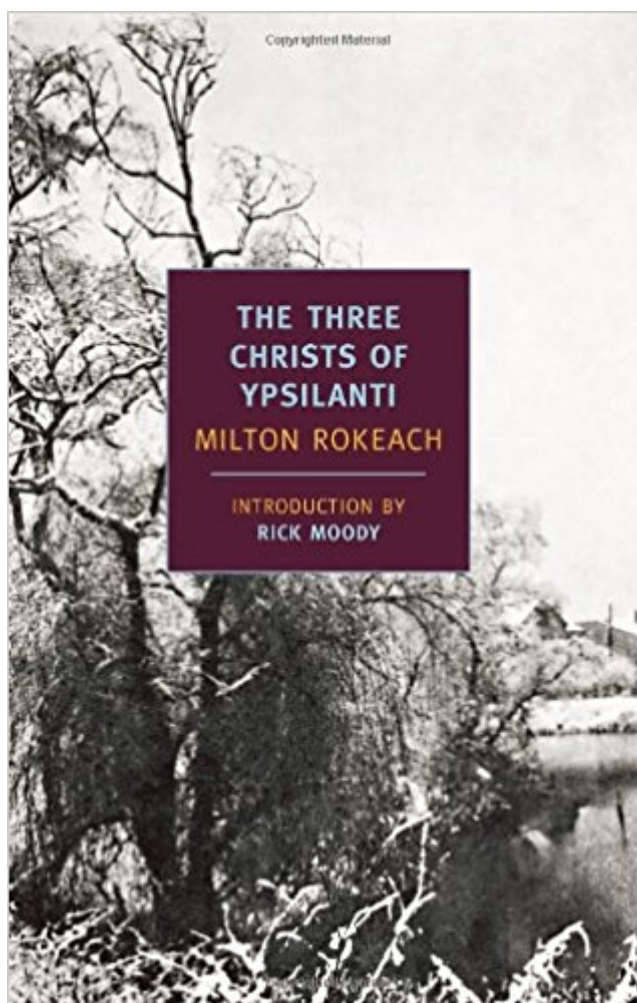


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The Three Christs Of Ypsilanti (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

On July 1, 1959, at Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan, the social psychologist Milton Rokeach brought together three paranoid schizophrenics: Clyde Benson, an elderly farmer and alcoholic; Joseph Cassel, a failed writer who was institutionalized after increasingly violent behavior toward his family; and Leon Gabor, a college dropout and veteran of World War II. The men had one thing in common: each believed himself to be Jesus Christ. Their extraordinary meeting and the two years they spent in one another's company serves as the basis for an investigation into the nature of human identity, belief, and delusion that is poignant, amusing, and at times disturbing. Displaying the sympathy and subtlety of a gifted novelist, Rokeach draws us into the lives of three troubled and profoundly different men who find themselves "confronted with the ultimate contradiction conceivable for human beings: more than one person claiming the same identity."

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Customer Reviews

"The Three Christs of Ypsilanti" is more than the record of an experiment in the outermost reaches of social psychology. Among other things it represents, in an unpretentious but remarkably vivid way, what institutionalized madness is like. -Steven Marcus, The New York Review of Books "A rare and eccentric journey into the madness of not three, but four men in an asylum. It is, in that sense, an unexpected tribute to human folly, and one that works best as a meditation on our own misplaced self-confidence. Whether scientist or psychiatric patient, we

assume others are more likely to be biased or misled than we are, and we take for granted that our own beliefs are based on sound reasoning and observation. This may be the nearest we can get to revelation – the understanding that our most cherished beliefs could be wrong. • Vaughan Bell, *The Slate* “The Three Christs is part meticulous log-book, part intriguing commentary and part high-voltage play as Rokeach recreates the men’s interactions over 25 months. Rokeach’s aim was to force them to confront the ultimate contradiction of believing they were the same being. Reissued for the first time in over 25 years, it comes with a pithy and sensitive preface by Rick Moody, foregrounding both changing attitudes to institutional care and the problems and possibilities of Rokeach’s experiment. • *The Guardian* “It also seemed to me, aged 16, that The Three Christs of Ypsilanti contained everything there was to know about the world. That’s not the case of course, but if resources were short, I’d still be inclined to salvage this book as a way of explaining the terror of the human condition, and the astonishing fact that people battle for their rights and dignity in the face of that terror, in order to establish their place in the world, whatever they decide it has to be.” -- Jenny Diski, *London Review of Books*

Milton Rokeach (1918–1988) was born in Hrubieszów, Poland, and at the age of seven moved with his family to Brooklyn. He received his BA from Brooklyn College in 1941. In the same year he began in the fledgling social psychology program at the University of California at Berkeley, but his studies were interrupted by a stint in the U.S. Army Air Forces Aviation Psychology Program. He returned to Berkeley in 1946 and received his PhD in 1947. Rokeach became a professor of psychology at Michigan State University and subsequently taught at the University of Western Ontario, Washington State University, and the University of Southern California. His famous psychological study *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (1964) has been made into a screenplay, a stage play, and two operas. His other major books are *The Open and Closed Mind* (1960), *Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values* (1968), and *The Nature of Human Values* (1973). Rokeach received the Kurt Lewin Memorial Award from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues in 1984 and the Harold Lasswell Award from the International Society of Political Psychology in 1988. Rick Moody was born in New York City in 1961. He is the author of five novels, three collections of stories, and a memoir, *The Black Veil*. His work has been widely anthologized. He has taught at Bennington College, SUNY Purchase, New York University, and the New School for Social Research. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Fascinating book. I bought a used copy in good condition. I first came across this book because it was mentioned in the back of GEB (Godel, Escher, & Bach). I've been meaning to read The 3 Christs for over 30 years. The book starts out written a bit like a novel, but then just becomes snippets of conversations. It's pretty obvious, after the fact, that these men cannot be cured. What is sad is that the doctors involved seem to feel that they can mess with these patients heads under the deluded impression that maybe something the doctors do will "fix" the patients. It's painfully obvious that the doctors have no clue what they are doing and are throwing spaghetti against the wall to see if any of it sticks. The book is heavily loaded with one particular patient, and a little bit of the second patient and almost none of the third patient. It is still a fascinating read, and I'm surprised no one has tried to make it into a movie. I didn't understand the cover art. I thought maybe it was just some trees and a lake in Ypsilanti. My husband read the fine print on the back of the book. Cover photo: William C. Weidling, "Nature's Mystic Apparition of Christ," Covington, KY 1914, Gelatin silver print. They he held the book away from me and all of a sudden I saw a naked bearded man in the tree branches on the left side of the book cover. Now I cannot UNsee it.

An intriguing and thought-provoking study of an experiment on personal identity that would never be undertaken today, when there are no longer large mental institutions with resident patient populations, not to mention ethical guidelines about informed consent from subjects. Nonetheless, these three men, all of whom claim to be Jesus Christ, are amazingly perceptive in intuiting the purpose of their participation in the project, and achingly ingenious in devising defenses against attempts to dislodge their delusions. To the extent to which it is possible to extrapolate from "The Three Christs of Ypsilanti" the book suggests that the lengths to which people will go to defend their perceptions of who they are--a phenomenon that is especially pertinent in an America in the throes of re-imagining itself. Well written, with compelling characters and interesting stories.

My parents worked at this hospital for almost 40 years. I grew up hearing stories of this place and seeing it once and awhile. However, this was such a different perspective.

I went into this book looking to learn about identity for the purpose of becoming a better story teller. What I got from this book far more than what I expected. This book isn't just about some patients in a mental hospital, it's about every person that ever had feelings of insecurity, every person that's ever felt social anxiety, every person that ever wished they were more than what they are. This book teaches what it is to be human.

This is one of the driest reads ever. The premise is great, three Christs meet in a mental institution. But it so clinically detached and boring that an alien invasion stuck in the middle wouldn't wake you up. But, it's a true story not a made up one and Rokeach is reporting their histories, not trying to write thrilling prose. He couldn't help it that the three Christs just weren't that interesting.

Very interesting take on psychosis. I love the story format and how it explains the three different patients

This was an insightful book for its time. The idea of placing three people who all claim to be divinity in a therapy session was a bit repugnant at first to me, almost like it was another Skinner rat experiment, but their interactions proved interesting. Be prepared for a bit of outside manipulation in the form of letters from "dad" the Director, and Madame Yeti Woman, however!

Awesome book! Worthwhile read! This was an amazing study! It's easy to read and really makes you think about schizophrenia in a different way!

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