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# Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater

William T. Vollmann

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"A deeply researched, lovingly detailed, and obsessive discourse on the nature of feminine beauty... A fervently reflective, probing narrative... that rewards on almost every page."—Publishers Weekly



## KISSING THE MASK WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN



BEAUTY, UNDERSTATEMENT AND  
FEMININITY IN JAPANESE NOH THEATER

With Some Thoughts on Muses (Especially Helga Testorf), Transgender Women,  
Kabuki Goddesses, Porn Queens, Poets, Housewives, Makeup Artists,  
Geishas, Valkyries and Venus Figurines

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**William T. Vollmann : Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. subtle.By Sally JohnsonI wasn't sure what to think of this book but I am glad I went ahead and got it. The author understands women. As a woman I feel comfortable saying that. He did an

event that I attended many years ago in the southeast and so I follow his career.8 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Kindle edition lacks picturesBy Enrico PoliSurprisingly, the pricey Kindle edition candidly declares at the beginning of the book that the images were not available for the electronic edition: twelve pages follow with the captions for the missing images.I returned the book and I probably will purchase a printed copy. I find the experience maddening.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I recommended him to my book clubBy Hilo HattieVollmann is an intellectual, a philosopher, his interests (which are many) can be edgy, an anthropologist/sociologist (and historian), he collects his research from actual informants, he is sometimes poetic, adds his own drawings (which are quite good) and photos to his books. I've read several of his books. This one is predominately about Noh drama, some geisha stuff, very little transvestite and even less kabuki stuff. I recommended him to my book club. We are reading several of his titles... many to choose from! I liked his "Poor People" book a lot too.

Intrepid journalist and novelist William T. Vollmann's colossal body of work stands unsurpassed for its range, moral imperative, and artistry.Booklist William T. Vollmann, the National Book Award-winning author of *Europe Central*, offers a charming, evocative, and piercing examination of the ancient Japanese tradition of Noh theatre and the keys it holds to our modern understanding of beauty. *Kissing the Mask* is the first major book on Noh by an American writer since the 1916 publication of the classic study *Pisan Cantos and the Noh* by Ezra Pound. But *Kissing the Mask* is pure Vollmann—illustrated with photos by the author with provocative related side-discussions on femininity, transgender, kabuki, pornography, geishas, and more.

The performance of female characters by male Noh actors sparks a deeply researched, lovingly detailed, and obsessive discourse on the nature of feminine beauty....[A] fervently reflective, probing narrative...[that] rewards it on almost every page. (Publishers Weekly)[A] provocative inquiry into beauty and desire... [Vollmann] is a passionate and penetrating observer ... a daring, brilliant, and idiosyncratic quest astonishing in its discernment, scope, and feeling. (Booklist)[Vollmann's] evocations of [Noh's] death-haunted stories, its eerie masks, its male actors playing women...are so electric and strange, so enchanted, that they made me long for the very dramas that have often sent me toward the exit before the intermission. (Pico Iyer, *New York Times Book Review*)Reward[s] the reader who stays with it for the long trip, the way a travel chronicle does.... Vollmann is not just a writer who admires. He is a writer who looks and touches. (San Francisco Chronicle)From the Back CoverFrom the National Book Award-winning author of *Europe Central*, a charming, evocative and piercing examination of an ancient Japanese tradition and the keys it holds to our modern understanding of beauty What is a woman? To what extent is femininity a performance? Writing with the extra-ordinary awareness and endless curiosity that have defined his entire oeuvre, William T. Vollmann takes an in-depth look at the Japanese craft of Noh theater, using the medium as a prism to reveal the conception of beauty itself.Sweeping readers from the dressing room of one of Japan's most famous Noh actors to a trans-vestite bar in the red-light district of Kabukicho, *Kissing the Mask* explores the enigma surrounding Noh theater and the traditions that have made it intrinsic to Japanese culture for centuries. Vollmann then widens his scope to encompass such modern artists of desire and loss as Mishima, Kawabata and Andrew Wyeth. From old Norse poetry to Greek cult statues, from elite geisha dancers to American makeup artists, from Serbia to India, Vollmann uncovers secrets of staged femininity and mysteries of perceived and expressed beauty, including specific makeup procedures furnished by an L.A. transgender bar girl, a Kabuki female impersonator, and the owner of a semi-clandestine studio for Tokyo cross-dressers.*Kissing the Mask* is illustrated with many evocative sketches and photographs by the author.About the AuthorWilliam T. Vollmann is the author of seven novels, three collections of stories, and a seven-volume critique of violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down*. He is also the author of *Poor People*, a worldwide examination of poverty through the eyes of the impoverished themselves; *Riding Toward Everywhere*, an examination of the train-hopping hobo lifestyle; and *Imperial*, a panoramic look at one of the poorest areas in America. He has won the PEN Center USA West Award for Fiction, a Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize and a Whiting Writers' Award. His journalism and fiction have been published in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Spin* and *Granta*. Vollmann lives in Sacramento, California.