



Sam Shepard: A Life

John J. Winters

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With more than fifty-five plays to his credit—including the 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child*—an Oscar nod for his portrayal of Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*, and an onscreen persona that's been aptly summed up as “Gary Cooper in denim,” Sam Shepard’s impact on American theater and film ranks with the greatest playwrights and actors of the past half-century.

Despite these accomplishments and more—five collections of prose, songwriting with Bob Dylan, filmmaking with Robert Frank and Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as romantic relationships with rocker Patti Smith and actress Jessica Lange—Shepard seems anything but satisfied. *Sam Shepard: A Life* details his lifelong bouts of insecurity and anxiety, and delves deeply into his relationship with his alcoholic father and his own battle with the bottle. Also examined for the first time in-depth are Shepard’s tumultuous relationship with Lange, and his decades-long adherence to the teachings of Russian spiritualist G. I. Gurdjieff.

Throughout this new biography, Winters gets to the heart of the enigma that is Sam Shepard, presenting a direct and comprehensive account of his life and work.

Sam Shepard: A Life Details

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From Reader Review Sam Shepard: A Life for online ebook

Nola says

Well considering the author did not have access to the subject matter, he has pulled together a lot of information from archives. I really enjoyed it.

M. Sarki says

<https://msarki.tumblr.com/post/158698...>

Shepard's most recent Oedipus-centered play, *A Particle of Dread*, was predictably unpopular and taxing to read. That is not to say this dramatic work offers proof of Shepard's decline. His plays have generally been a bit annoyingly crude and sometimes obtuse. But for years Shepard has continued to suit up and show up, and he follows his muse wherever it takes him. A long career now of writing and acting has shared his life with other demanding physical movements including raising horses and playing music in a band. And because of what impels him to do what it is he does, Shepard's personal life has often given sway. Taken as a whole, and after having read most everything Sam Shepard has written as well as viewing the bulk of his better ventures into acting, it is understandable that his powers would one day wane and be judged as "in decline". But the seventy-two year old man remains a force to be reckoned with; a persona of American Midwest greatness and, in addition, a sad and angry Western cowboy bent on eventually breaking himself.

John Winters has written an honest and comprehensive account of Sam Shepard. This intensive look, both inside and outside, of a man's long career and life, is obviously well-informed and researched. A necessary book added to a still-growing oeuvre. And for those interested, a serious attempt to understand a man who has remained for many an American enigma.

Brent says

This is a very good summary biography. Like many, I know Shepard most from his acting in movies like *The Right Stuff*. I don't know why I never realized he was a member of the eccentric-folk band Holy Modal Rounders: probably because I skipped their LP records. I'm looking forward to reading Shepard's plays. I was sent a finished copy for review. Having sauntered through the book, I can recommend the author's love of his subject. Like many a good literary biography, it's sending me to the subject's writing.
Recommended.

Mary Jo says

Advance copy. Publication in April. Shepard is an interesting man. I knew he was a playwright and author but have to admit being most familiar with his movie work, first seeing him in *Country*, filmed in my home state. Dedicated stage theater buffs (which I am not) should enjoy this one.

Mary says

This is a very thorough biography of Shephard. Writer, actor, rancher; all roles taken on with a great deal of introspection. Too much introspection if you ask me. And really, why does the reader need to know that Shephard had all his teeth pulled recently?

Doctor Moss says

I was always curious about Sam Shepard. I had known of his work as a playwright and then, when his acting career began to take off, I thought he wasn't getting much notoriety, at least in the popular culture, for someone so accomplished in so many different areas.

Since then, I've especially been interested in his fiction — the short story collections (Motel Chronicles, Cruising Paradise, Great Dream of Heaven, Day out of Days, Hawk Moon) and now his first novel, *The One Inside*. His fiction is deeply brooding and autobiographical, much like his acting and much like *Paris, Texas*, maybe his best known movie.

So I wondered about the person.

Winters' biography certainly scratches that itch. He begins with Shephard's family history, speculating, on the basis of Shephard's own "musings", back as far as the Mayflower. Winters pays special attention to Shephard's father's side of the family, setting up themes to trace later not only through Shephard's real life relationship to his father, but also through so much of Shephard's writing.

Shepard's childhood story centers around his time growing up in Bradbury, California, near Pasadena. I have to admit to a little bit of surprise at how "normal" his childhood and teenage years appear. Winters even includes a photograph of Shephard (then known as "Steve Rogers") as a yell leader in high school, and notes his participation in track and basketball, as well as the 4-H Club. There are certainly hints of his wavering from the straight and narrow — Shephard has said that he broke a high school track record while on Benzedrine.

Shepard also got involved in drama and theater in high school, in school plays and in acting lessons. In fact, he seems to have found numerous long-lived passions — animals, music, and theater — early in life. He received special encouragement in theater during his time at Mt. San Antonio College in California, writing his first play during that time.

But it's his relationship with his father that provides the strongest running theme throughout the book. Shephard's father was a violent alcoholic, who seemed to lose his way early in Sam's life, after service in World War II as a pilot. The struggle in the relationship gets played and replayed throughout Shephard's plays, so many of which explore broken versions of family life.

In his own life, Shephard is haunted by the fear that he will turn into his own father, and, at many points, he seems to have done exactly that. One great difference of course, is art. Unlike his father, Shephard plays that drama out in the theater for all to see.

His later years are still mired in that same tortuous play of alcohol, broken relationships, and the inner struggles that make Shepard a world champion at the brooding self-reflection we see in all his writings and even in his acting.

I enjoyed the book, mainly because of my own curiosity about Shepard, and how such a person as accomplished as he is, and as troubled as he is, came to be. People who choose the path of art, over more stable and secure professional lives, have always interested me — something must have driven them in that direction and kept them going, given the strong pull of “normalcy” back into the straight and narrow. Shepard seems unlikely to ever be pulled in.

The book does not flow as easily as some biographies. It is less thematic narrative than chronicle of events -- the themes do arise, but as a reader, your own curiosity has to compel you to find and savor them.

Sheralee says

This book was beyond difficult to get into. The author was over-analyzing a previous biography and Sam Shepard's own words and stories. He goes on and on about whether or not Shepard is Shepard the Third, the Seventh or the fifth in his family line. Who cares and what difference does it make???? I'm going to look for that other biography to read, I think Sam Shepard is an interesting person.

Brian Beatty says

Shepard may be an even better actor than audiences realized. A more serious writer, too.

Faythe Millhoff says

Excellent bio of a very interesting man. Well written and insightful. Enjoyed this book very much.

patty says

Extensively researched. A must-read for fans of "playwright" Sam Shepard.

Jim Cherry says

Sam Shepard was always someone I wanted to know more about. After first seeing him in “The Right Stuff” I learned he was a playwright of some repute. I saw “True West,” but other than the movies, I saw him in or read in People magazine and his relationship with Jessica Lange. I didn’t know much about him as either a person or an artist. It was something I put off until I heard about his death on July 27, 2017. My curiosity started getting the better of me and I started looking for a good biography, not some pop bio written in the heat of popular fandom, but something a little more substantial and for the most part found it in “Sam

Shepard: A Life" by John J Winters.

"But you know, oddly, I wasn't even fucking trying." So Sam Shepard said in an interview late in his life about his career, and that's how Winters makes it seem in his new biography "Sam Shepard: A Life." Winters gives us the history of Shepard's early years, his father as a military man, the moving around from posting to posting until his father becomes a teacher in semi-rural California, where Shepard leads a life filled with school, animals, eventually Shepard gravitates to theater in high school and makes early steps to an interest in art when an art house movie theater opens in his home town that he frequents. He's given a copy of "Waiting For Godot" that he likes. After high school he joins a college theater group and finally a traveling theater group that is somewhat innovative. When Shepard goes to New York he quickly starts writing what are considered avant-garde plays. In one instance Shepard employed a subsonic oscillator to keep audiences on edge for the play. Then of course on to Shepard's acting career, and relationship with Jessica Lange with the book ending around January 2016 with the author wondering what may lie in Shepard's creative life in the future.

One of the consistent themes of Shepard's life and career is a feeling of "lostness," and that feeling is definitely transmitted in Winters book. So what's missing? What's missing is Shepard's early influences. A writer is usually the sum of his influences. Where did he come up with the background to break the rules? A writer's early life is usually spent reading. Where are the missing influences? Shepard grew up in a semi-rural area in the 50's would reading have labeled Shepard a "sissie" or a "book-worm" (or worse) by his social group? After he got to New York did it play to his image as a "cowboy" to not acknowledge his reading? Or was Shepard what he claimed to be, spontaneously generated because he was ignorant of the rules, and he was unfettered enough to be able to write innovatively because he didn't know any better? Or was he just lucky enough to be able to channel his anger into plays at a time when the surrounding society was in flux? That's something left for the reader or perhaps a future biography that will fill in the holes better or explain the absence of influences better.

Grant Conversano says

Sam lived one hell of a life. The themes of his plays certainly echo into his life. I guess the trick is to find a way to accept our heredity with grace. To own our past, where we come from without shame or resentment, and find a way to do the best we can with what time we have. Running from the father will only get to you your grave faster.
