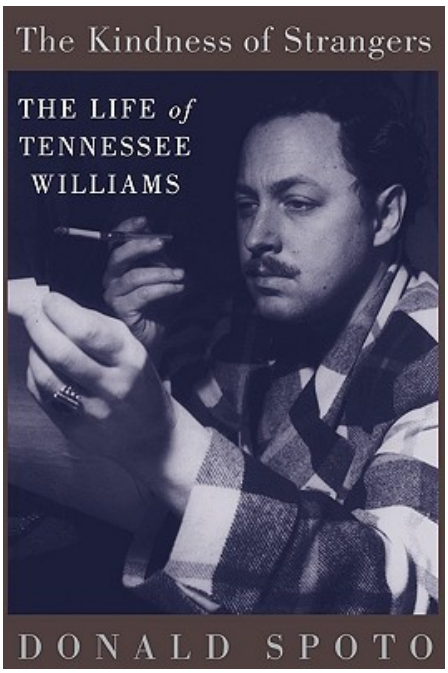

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams

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This is the first complete, critical biography of Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), one of America's finest playwrights and the author of (among many important works) *The Glass Menagerie, Summer and Smoke, A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Suddenly Last Summer,* and *The Night of the Iguana.* Award-winning biographer Donald Spoto gives us not only a full and accurate account of Williams's life, he also reveals the intimate connections between the playwright's personal dramas and his remarkably autobiographical art. From his birth into a genteel Southern family, through his success, celebrity, and wealth, to his drug addictions, promiscuity, and creative struggles, Tennessee Williams lived a life as gripping as his plays. *The Kindness of Strangers,* based on Williams's own papers, his mother's diaries, and interviews with scores of friends, lovers, and professional associates, is, in the author's words, a portrait of "a man more disturbing, more dramatic, richer and more wonderful than any character he created."

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams Details

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Author	:	Donald Spoto
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From Reader Review The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams for online ebook

Richard Jespers says

Biography of Tennessee Williams. Harrowing. His life after 1960 was all downhill in spite of great wealth (perhaps because of it). He drank and drugged himself to death like Hemingway, like Fitzgerald, like Capote, like Inge . . . . [Read TW's *Notesbooks* to get his own confessions about the matter.]

Cass says

It's depressing to read a biography about a man who overdoses. About 2/3 of the way in, the story was getting pretty bleak. It wasn't totally the authors fault, I mean, you can't change history. But the way he wrote some things, "That was the last time that Tennessee was happy..." gave you little to look forward to in the coming chapters.
Overall, I feel like I learned lot about my hero, from intimate details to professional accomplishments. I want to pick up his plays and re-read them in this new light.

Concordian Library says

6 Copies

Brad Hodges says

This year is the centennial of the birth of Tennessee Williams. For my birthday I got a copy of the two-volume Library of America complete works, and I'm going to try to make my way through it. Of course I've read or seen, either on stage or the film adaptations, most of his major works, but the man was astoundingly prolific.

To get started, I thought I'd read a biography to get my bearings. Donald Spoto, who is a biographer best known for writing about film and theater celebrities such as Alfred Hitchcock, Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and others, wrote The Kindness of Strangers in 1985, just three years after Williams' death. It appears to be the only one-volume biography of Williams, and is a compact, largely no-frills affair, but does offer some cogent commentary about his works, and points out warts and all.

Williams was born in Mississippi but raised mostly in St. Louis. His father worked in the shoe business, and disapproved of his inclinations toward writing (Spoto has the delicious fact that while working in the shoe factory he befriended a man named Stanley Kowalski). He was devoted to his maternal grandparents. His grandfather was a minister, and lived well into Williams' years of fame, living with him in his home in Key west.

After struggling through college as a journalism major, Williams went to New York with no money and ended up meeting an agent named Audrey Wood, who believed in him. After a few promising misfires, he struck gold with The Glass Menagerie, followed that up with Summer and Smoke, which was misdirected in its Broadway debut, and was later acclaimed in a revival. Then came A Streetcar Named Desire, and Williams was known as America's greatest playwright, and its richest. Fifteen of his works ended up made into films, but he didn't like most of them. Spoto quotes a friend saying, "And once, when he heard that the film of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was playing--which he hated--he went downtown and said to the people on line for tickets, 'This movie will set the industry back fifty years! Go home.'"

Though he had many successes, including Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Rose Tattoo, Suddenly Last Summer, and Sweet Bird of Youth, his last great play was in 1964, with Night of the Iguana. From then on he kept writing, but baffled critics and audiences. He began to grow bitter and paranoid, turning on Wood and several other friends. He seemed to wander the globe, flittering from Key West (I made a pilgrimage to his house, now called Rose Cottage, on one of my visits there) to New Orleans to Sicily. All the while, he was hopelessly hooked on drugs and alcohol.

What I took away most from the book was how incredibly sad a life he led. He was haunted by his sister Rose, who was lobotomized as a girl and kept in an institution (she outlived him). Spoto details all the mentions of Rose, either as a name or as a flower, in his works. Of course the most famous incarnation she makes is as Laura in The Glass Menagerie, which for my money is one of the most beautiful, heartbreaking plays ever written.

Williams was a hypochondriac, always thinking he was dying and always saying his next play was his last, even as early as the 1940s. He took downers and speed, and washed them down with wine. When he died, at the age of 72, he choked on the cap from a bottle of pills. Spoto makes several references to Williams overwhelming sense of misery, perhaps this sums it up best: "He was withdrawing from work to the solace of drugs, and from people to the darkness of solitude. And with this unfortunate shift in the personal and professional bases of his life, a cycle of misery and despair and decreativity enveloped him through the end of the decade."

Is Tennesee Williams (Spoto covers the mystery surrounding his change of name--he was born Thomas Lanier Williams, but there is no definitive answer) America's greatest playwright? I don't know, but I can't argue against it. He has written about half a dozen true classics, and he was also a man who liked to shock his audience, covering taboo subjects like repressed homosexuality (Williams was homosexual, and didn't make much of a secret of it), castration, and cannibalism. But his plays were also tender and empathetic toward his characters, and if he lived a life of despair, it poured out through his words.

Mary says

This seems searingly honest without being catty or glib. A fascinating look into the life of one of my favorite writers.

Monte Dutton says

It's a book I likely wouldn't have read had my mother not picked it up at a yard sale. It's a wonderful biography, capturing this brilliant, flawed man in all his glory and ignominy. Tennessee Williams' story is so sad, but his sadness was what made his plays compelling and his doom inevitable. He never could move past the tortures of his own life, and as he descended into addiction and decline, he lost his coherence. His was a grand life nonetheless, and the author captures it all brilliantly.

Sean Lovelace says

Tennessee Williams swam, then got his writing done, then moved to sex and drugs. There is a lesson here. Get the writing done first.

Carol Storm says

This well written and thoroughly researched biography is an overwhelmingly compassionate look at the life of Tennessee Williams, arguably America's greatest playwright.

Donald Spoto does an amazing job of showing how the terrible tragedies of Tennessee's early life shaped his greatest masterpieces. He details the way the adored sister Rose was the only bright spot of the playwright's childhood, and how she gradually went insane in adolescence and was eventually institutionalized. There's a lot of grief for Rose in THE GLASS MENAGERIE and in STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. He also shows how Tennessee's father was a brutal tyrant who ridiculed and humiliated his shy, not particularly masculine son. Both Stanley Kowalski and Big Daddy are clearly based on the author's real life father!

Spoto writes about Tennessee's later years with enormous understanding and compassion. For the last twenty years of his life Tennessee Williams was basically a full time alcoholic and drug addict, yet he never ceased trying to write new plays and regain his former greatness. Spoto hints that his fall from fame and his drug problems can indirectly be attributed to "the Sixties," which (in Spoto's opinion) were a time of excess and vulgarity with no redeeming features.

The great flaw of this book is the biographer's refusal to discuss Tennessee' relationship to the times he lived in. Williams spent his whole life writing about "the South," but it was never the ugly, brutal, bombing, lynching Jim Crow south of contemporary headlines and reality. Tennessee gained fame in a way not too different from Margaret Mitchell, selling a picturesque, charmingly shabby, poignantly defeated south that Yankees could enjoy without too much thought. Spoto never confronts this. He never attempts to explain what Tennessee Williams really thought about black people, about segregation, lynching, etc. There is no mention of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. or anything else that happened in the Sixties, other than the easy availability of drugs. On race matters, Tennessee Williams gets a pass, even though he gloried in fake nostalgia for a genteel south that never really existed.

This failure is particularly glaring when you consider that Williams didn't actually grow up on a vast plantation somewhere in the Deep South, but in urban, industrial St. Louis. (His family moved there in 1918 when he was seven.) Spoto acknowledges (in one paragraph) that St. Louis in 1918 was as strictly segregated as Mississippi. He tactfully neglects to mention, however, that in 1917 St. Louis was the site of one of the

most brutal, violent, and prolonged race riots of the 20th century. An entire middle class black neighborhood was burned to the ground, never to be rebuilt. (Duke Ellington wrote a song about it, too. "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo.") As a little boy Tennessee Williams must have heard plenty of stories about what that was like. He must have heard plenty of people in his own neighborhood (like his father) talking (or indeed bragging) about the awful destruction they'd just brought about. But for Tennessee, only the dream is real. Only the South suffers.

And Spoto is happy to play along.
