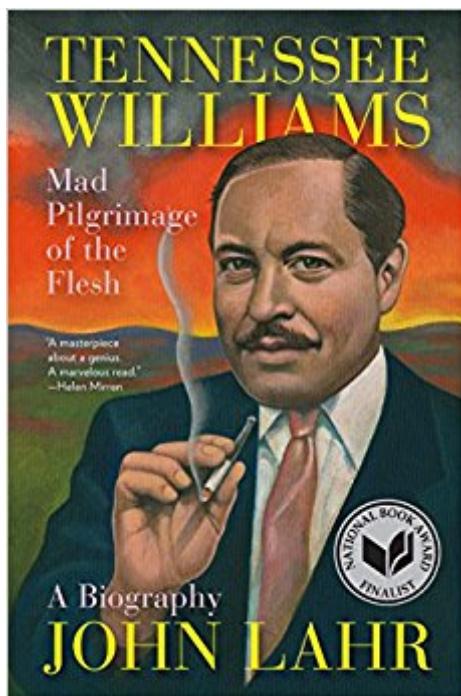


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# Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage Of The Flesh



## Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Biography and Finalist for the National Book Award. The definitive biography of America's greatest playwright from the celebrated drama critic of *The New Yorker*. John Lahr has produced a theater biography like no other. *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* gives intimate access to the mind of one of the most brilliant dramatists of his century, whose plays reshaped the American theater and the nation's sense of itself. This astute, deeply researched biography sheds a light on Tennessee Williams's warring family, his guilt, his creative triumphs and failures, his sexuality and numerous affairs, his misreported death, even the shenanigans surrounding his estate. With vivid cameos of the formative influences in Williams's life—his fierce, belittling father Cornelius; his puritanical, domineering mother Edwina; his demented sister Rose, who was lobotomized at the age of thirty-three; his beloved grandfather, the Reverend Walter Dakin—*Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* is as much a biography of the man who created *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as it is a trenchant exploration of Williams's plays and the tortured process of bringing them to stage and screen. The portrait of Williams himself is unforgettable: a virgin until he was twenty-six, he had serial homosexual affairs thereafter as well as long-time, bruising relationships with Pancho Gonzalez and Frank Merlo. With compassion and verve, Lahr explores how Williams's relationships informed his work and how the resulting success brought turmoil to his personal life. Lahr captures not just Williams's tempestuous public persona but also his backstage life, where his agent Audrey Wood and the director Elia Kazan play major roles, and Marlon Brando, Anna Magnani, Bette Davis, Maureen Stapleton, Diana Barrymore, and Tallulah Bankhead have scintillating walk-on parts. This is a biography of the highest order: a book about the major American playwright of his time written by the major American drama critic of his time. Winner of the 2015 Sheridan Morley Prize for Theatre Biography American Academy of Arts and Letters' Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award Chicago Tribune Best Books of 2014 USA Today 10 Books We Loved Reading Washington Post 10 Best Books of 2014 80 photographs

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Offers plenty of backstage anecdotes and high private drama. But Mr. Lahr, ever the critic, keeps the plays themselves front and center. The book has already won enthusiastic advance notice along with blurbs from a kick line of A-list

Theatricals including Helen Mirren, John Guare and Tony Kushner. Jennifer Schuessler, New York Times "Scintillating on the backstage and bedroom dramas and almost intrusively perceptive on the autobiographical nature of Williams' art." Charles McNulty, Los Angeles Times "Intricately detailed" gripping. Janet Maslin, New York Times "A masterpiece." Hilton Als, New Yorker "A crucial contribution to the arguments that should always rage around a man who was one of the greatest American playwrights of his tempestuous century." Chris Jones, Chicago

Tribune "Raises the curtain on Tennessee Williams." Elissa Schappell, Vanity Fair "This is by far the best book ever written about America's greatest playwright. John Lahr, the longtime drama critic for the New Yorker, knows his way around Broadway better than anyone. He is a witty and elegant stylist, a scrupulous researcher, a passionate yet canny advocate. He brings us as close to Williams as we are ever likely to get." J.D. McClatchy, Wall Street Journal "There is only one word for this biography: superb." Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review "Brilliant" [Lahr's] achievement is not likely to be surpassed. Publishers Weekly "Could this be the best theater book I've ever read? It just might be. Tennessee Williams had two great pieces of luck: Elia Kazan to direct his work and now John Lahr to make thrilling sense of his life." John Guare, author of Six Degrees of Separation "Splendid beyond words. It would be hard to imagine a more satisfying biography." Bill Bryson "Swear-to-god, it's the most original, insightful, thrilling biography I've ever read!" Elizabeth Ashley "This is a masterpiece about a genius. Only John Lahr, with his perceptions about the theater, about writers, about poetry, and

about people could have written this book. What a marvelous read.â€“ Helen Mirrenâ€“ “Unsurpassable” An eloquent, spellbinding narrative that emerges as an instant classic.â€“ Ron Chernow, Pulitzer Prizeâ€“ winning author of *Washington: A Life*â€“ “It is a MAGNIFICENT work. Mesmerizing, illuminating, and heartbreakingly brilliant.â€“ AndrÃ© Gregoryâ€“ “Brilliant and seamless. A labor of the profoundest love, and it comes from the heart and mind of one of our greatest theater writers.â€“ AndrÃ© Bishop, artistic director of Lincoln Center Repertory Theaterâ€“ “A splendid book, one of the finest critical biographies extant.â€“ Robert Brusteinâ€“ “There’s never been an American critic like John Lahr. His writing exalts, honors, and dignifies the profession and, more importantly, the art.â€“ Tony Kushnerâ€“ “The singular achievement of John Lahrâ€“’s magisterial book, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* is that itâ€“’s one bewitching writerâ€“’s journey into the livesâ€“’s public and privateâ€“’s of another.â€“ Jeremy Gerard, *Deadline Hollywood*â€“ “Magnificentâ€“’s one of the best written and most extraordinary biographies Iâ€“’ve ever read, in any field.â€“ Mike Fischer, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*â€“ “At once sensitive and magisterial, and it fulfills the ultimate test for a literary biography by convincing you that the works cannot be understood without it. Once you have read it, it becomes part of their meaning.â€“ John Carey, *Sunday Times (UK)*â€“ “It is a masterpiece on several levels: of synthesis and analysis (an amazing life apprehended afresh, with great learning lightly borne and a strong streak of showbiz savvy; a page-turner that is almost embarrassingly devourable).â€“ Paul Taylor, *The Independent*â€“ “Scintillating on the backstage and bedroom dramas and almost intrusively perceptive on the autobiographical nature of Williams’ art.â€“ Charles McNulty, *Chicago Tribune*â€“ “Essential reading for anyone who cares about the theater.â€“ Wendy Smith, *Daily Beast*â€“ “Dazzlingâ€“’s an epic achievement.â€“ Ann Levin, *Associated Press*â€“ “Fascinatingâ€“’s Lahr gives us a sense of the ebb and flow of Williamsâ€“’s life, exercising a criticâ€“’s keen eye on the plays, a novelistâ€“’s gift for characterization, and a historianâ€“’s awareness of the way a changing American society colored his workâ€“’s. As much a biography of the plays as of the playwrightâ€“’s a book that lets the life illuminate the work and the work illuminate the life.â€“ Charles Matthews, *Washington Post*â€“ “A work that is scintillating on the backstage and bedroom dramas and almost intrusively perceptive on the autobiographical nature of Williams’ art.â€“ Kevin Nance, *Chicago Tribune*â€“ “Lahr has managed to capture the complex and at times contradictory qualitiesâ€“’s the razor wit and gracious Southern charm, the bottomless drive and uncanny capacity for self-destructionâ€“’s that characterized one of

the 20th century's greatest writers.â• - Elyse Gardner, USA Todayâ“Excellentâ• | A forceful claim for the playwrightâ„¢s immortality.â• - Laura Collins-Hughes, Boston Globeâ“Lahrâ„¢s expansive, polished and keenly observed volume is a major work of American theater criticism and biography.â• - Gerald Bartell, San Francisco Chronicleâ“Elegantly written as well as psychologically acuteâ• | Lahr balances quotation and interpretation, sympathy and criticism, in this searing and unforgettable portrait of the artist who gave voice to the repressed, the reviled and the restless.â• - Brenda Wineapple, Wall Street Journalâ“[P]rodigiously researchedâ• | acute and elegantâ• | Lahr is most superb on the relationship between Williams and the director Eliz Kazan, perhaps his greatest collaborator.â• - New York Times Holiday Gift Guideâ“Witting, moving, ferociously intelligentâ• | essential reading for any theater fan.â• - Jocelyn McClurg, USA Today

National Book Award finalist John Lahr is the author of Tennessee Williams: *Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, among other books. He was the senior drama critic of *The New Yorker* for over two decades. He has twice won the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism and is the first critic ever to win a Tony Award (coauthor, *Elaine Stritch at Liberty*).

John Lahr's biography, "Tennessee Williams: *Mad Pilgrim of the Flesh*," is the best theatre book I've read in a lifetime as actor, teacher, director and writer. I was already hooked on theatre when I served aboard the USS Wyoming dry-docked in New York harbor for an overhaul and I picked up a freefer at the Stage Door Canteen for Williams's play, "The Glass Menagerie." That single performance is burned into my emotional memory as the most memorable of a lifetime. Taylor's acting and Tennessee's writing have been the most lasting influences of my own study, teaching and work in the theatre. I've seen most all the original Williams productions in New York; had the opportunity to direct several in both college and AEA professional regional theatres; read everything published (plus a few original drafts) but this biography by John Lahr is the definitive last word. A labor of love some twelve years in the making, it is extensively researched, beautifully written and clearly told. It clarifies and contradicts exaggerations and outright fabrications already out there. The emphasis here is a detailed study of Tennessee himself via an insightful empathetic analysis of his characters--Amanda, Blanche, Stanley--you name them--in order for you to know, understand and appreciate the playwright himself, his tragedy, courage and determination as an artist. For anyone interested in humanism and understanding you will find no more definitive portrait of our greatest American writer than in the page-turning book by Mr Lahr. For your own sake, hie yourself to the

nearest bookstore, or your computer, and order it. You're in for one hell of a great read.

As dramaturg for *A Streetcar Named Desire* recently, I bought this book to bone up on the events that led Tennessee Williams to write the play. The author John Lahr provided that necessary information and so much more. The book is very detailed in the research of Williams' life, and that life was a very unusual one for the times. The book tells a story of Tennessee's tough childhood, his difficult times as a young gay man in an era when it was illegal and dangerous to be so, his struggle to succeed as a writer, his success as a writer and his decline as a writer. It's a very sympathetic biography of a great writer who lived on the edge. Even if one does not know anything about the mid century theater in America, TW's story is interesting enough to hold one's attention. The book is a prize winner; the author is a lauded theater critic and this book may be his masterpiece.

It is no surprise, of course, that this biography by John Lahr is brilliant. I have been a big fan of Mr. Williams' plays, like so many before me, since high school. Additionally, I never miss a column by John Lahr in the *New Yorker*. He is clear headed, intentionally articulate, and covers theater, which is the business I am sometimes in (when they'll have me) as a playwright. This book is long and harrowing and a page turner. You just want to know! (Even though you already know...) What is going to happen to T.W. Lahr pulls no punches and exposes poor T.W. as the frantic, narcissistic, hysterical that he often was. Of course, the positive opposite side of that coin is we get to read how T.W. drew from his life to create all of his creations. Mr. Lahr has made it his duty to draw all the lines between Mr. Williams' life and his work. Highly readable and exhaustively researched (wait 'til you read the end notes. Egad!)...it feels like THE OFFICIAL TOME of this great writer's life. Beautifully edited. And...I read the whole crazy thing on my Kindle App on my phone, which was completely enjoyable. Buy it. Read it. Love it. Or hate it. Whatever. It's the one.

In-depth bio of Williams focusing on his adult years. (I had always wondered why there was never the promised sequel to "Tom," the award-winning bio of Williams' early years. Lahr notes that the author died. Lahr primarily covers the years post-"Tom.") A balanced look at a life and career that was perhaps less tragic and melodramatic than one might think.

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