



Plays 1937-1955

Tennessee Williams , Mel Gussow (Editor) , Kenneth Holditch (Editor)

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The second volume traces Williams' career as it evolved in his adventurous and sometimes shocking later works, including *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, plays that deal with acts of horrific violence; the satiric *Period of Adjustment*, *The Night of the Iguana*, a moving drama that contains some of Williams' most lyric writing, and *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, a reimagining of the earlier *Summer and Smoke*. *Kingdom of Earth* (also known as *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*) began a more experimental phase of Williams' writing represented here by *The Mutilated*, *Small Craft Warnings*, and *Out Cry*, while in his final phase, in such plays as *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* and the autobiographical *Vieux Carre*, Williams returned to many of his earlier themes and settings". The 33 plays collected here reveal a prophetic figure in American life and letters, a writer of generous sympathies and uncompromising frankness who reached wide audiences with plays that revolutionized the themes and the styles, of the modern theater.

This edition includes a newly researched chronology of Williams' life, explanatory notes an essay on the texts, and east lists of many of the original productions.

Plays 1937-1955 Details

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Tj Tunnington says

An amazing play write that was dealing with some very dark personal Edmonds and it shows in his work. Also a very controlling figure who know how exactly he wanted his plays told who was meticulous with his stage direction. Some great stories here.

Duffy Pratt says

I tend to judge anthologies by what's best in them, and not by a few clunkers. These Library of America books are great, especially for anyone who shares my completeness compulsion. I've reviewed most of the plays elsewhere, and so will not repeat myself. (Or worse, contradict what I already said if I happen to have forgotten my impressions.) Overall, I have to say I enjoyed this entire collection, even the plays I found only to be OK.

Robin Friedman says

I first got to know some of the plays of Tennessee Williams (1911 -- 1983) in the mid-1960s, and I have revisited his works often over the years. Last year, I had the opportunity to read John Lahr's biography, "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" (2014) which revitalized my interest in Williams. I decided to read or to reread Williams, using what I had learned from Lahr, in the Library of America two-volume collection of his plays. The first LOA volume, which I am reviewing here, consists of plays written between 1937 and 1955 as selected by two scholars of Williams: Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holditch. The volume includes a chronology of Williams' life, and information on the original productions and editions of the plays in addition to the texts.

Williams' works have always moved me with their beautifully flowing lyricism, their romanticism, and sexuality and with the tension they dramatize between convention and individuality, religion and sex, love and violence. The boundaries of some of these tensions have changed since the 1940s and 1950s, but I think Williams stories, characters, and dilemmas are independent of particular times. They are also highly personal and autobiographical. At the outset of his biography, Lahr quotes Williams in the late 1930's vowing to write plays that "were a picture of my own heart". In Lahr's account, Williams later continued to aim "to be simple, direct, and terrible. I will speak truth as I see it.. without concealment or evasion and with a fearless unashamed frontal assault upon life." This volume and its companion allow the reader to measure whether and how well Williams succeeded in his aims.

This volume shows the continuity in Williams' work, in themes characterizations, and settings from the earliest plays through the final work in the book, the "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof". It also shows the diversity of which Williams was capable which may surprise those new to his work. The volume documents the hard-won nature of success even for a greatly gifted writer. Williams struggled with his writing for years, taking menial jobs, living in squalid rooming houses, and enduring failures. Although he often was tempted to give up, he persevered in doing what he was born to do.

This book includes the three plays for which Williams is best remembered: his first Broadway play, "The Glass Menagerie" (1945), "A Streetcar Named Desire" (1947), and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (1957).

Williams struggled with the final act of "Cat" and the version produced on Broadway and Williams' initial version both are included in this volume. Each of these three works have been revived many times and are masterworks of American literature and American theater. It is valuable to have them together in one beautifully bound book of American classics. But there is much more to the volume. Besides these three famous plays, I want to focus on some of Williams less well-known works.

The book includes "Summer and Smoke", one of my earliest and favorite Williams plays which poignantly captures the battle between spirit and flesh in a small Mississippi town in the years of WW I. I loved revisiting this play, seeing the film for the first time, and reading Williams' later rewrite, "The Eccentricities of a Nightingale" in the second LOA volume. This volume also includes a difficult work, "Camino Real", a play which failed at its opening but which in its expressivist character foreshadows Williams' late works.

The surprise of the volume was "The Rose Tattoo". I had not been familiar with this work, but Lahr's discussion made me want to read it. I read the play and watched the film version which starred the famous Italian actress Anna Magnani. This is a lovely play about the power of love and sexuality and about the possibility of renewal in mid-life. It is a Williams masterwork which had escaped me.

Williams early works and one-act plays, included in the book, are worth knowing in themselves and as foreshadowing what Williams would later write. The best and most surprising of these early plays is "Not about Nightingales", a drama of prison life, which Williams wrote in 1938 in St Louis. The play received its world premier in 1998 to great acclaim as a result of the efforts of Vanessa Redgrave. With social commentary unusual for a Williams play, this rough early work captures many of his themes. Williams' short play about the death of D.H. Lawrence, "I rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix" also is worth getting to know. In a short note to the play Williams wrote of Lawrence in words that also applied to himself, "Lawrence felt the mystery and power of sex, as the primal life urge, and was the lifelong adversary of those who wanted to keep the subject locked away in the cellars of prudery." Among the short plays in this volume, I most enjoyed "27 Wagons Full of Cotton" which became the basis of the 1955 movie "Baby Doll", and "This Property is Condemned", which was loosely adopted in a 1966 film starring Natalie Wood and Robert Redford.

Williams frequently added notes, prefaces or afterwards to his plays. His essays accompanying "The Glass Menagerie", "Battle of Angels", and "The Rose Tattoo" are in this volume and particularly worth reading, as is the essay "Something Wild", which accompanied a collection of one-act plays. Williams wrote, explaining his understanding of local theater and the role of art:

"Community theaters have a social function and it is to be that kind of an irritant in the shell of their community. Not to conform, not to wear the conservative business suit of their audience, but to let their hair grow long and even greasy, to make wild gestures, break glasses, fight, shout, and fall downstairs! When you see them acting like this -- not respectably, not quite decently, even! -- then you will know that something is going to happen in that outfit, something disturbing, something irregular, something brave and honest."

The volume includes Williams' plays and attendant essays. It does not include his 1950 novel, "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone" which I think belongs with his best work and should be preserved.

I enjoyed rereading and thinking about Tennessee Williams again in the company of John Lahr and the Library of America. Most of Williams' plays are available in individual editions. I have posted reviews of many of them, or on the film versions of the plays, discussing them in more detail, for those readers who may be interested. Readers interested in American literature and in Tennessee Williams owe a debt of gratitude to the Library of America.

Robin Friedman

Brett says

This is the second of these Library of America volumes I've read recently (I also read Kate Chopin), and they are just very impressive books. This one, as you can see from the title, covers the entirety of Tennessee Williams' dramatic output from his earliest plays through *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. Other famous plays included are *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as several other less well-known plays and one-act plays.

I hadn't read Williams since I read *The Glass Menagerie* as an undergrad. The plays are fun to read, full of emotion and large characters. As you'd expect, with 20 years worth of work, some plays are stronger than others. Still, with the exception of maybe *Camino Real*, I found pretty much all of them to be more or less enjoyable.

The plays are of course of their time, with sexual and racial content that sounds pretty harsh to modern readers at some spots. But on the whole, the impression the reader is left with--hot, drunk, angry, poor, desperate--is vivid and memorable.

Ida says

love him but he will never love me

Ayne Ray says

More stunning plays by one of the greatest authors to come out of the American South.

Andres says

A great review of one of the all time best American playwrights.

Jim Leckband says

This edition of Williams' early plays to his masterworks lets you see the beginnings of the playwright as he works his themes early on - stultifying families and culture, combative relationships, thwarted love, homosexuality (and not that hidden considering the times) and madness/alcoholism as a reaction to these forces. All this makes it seem complex, but Williams is a genius at drama and characters that it seems so organic.

Keith says

It's been a long time (college?) since I've read or seen any of Williams' plays, and that was only the Glass Menagerie. At the time, I was taken by the lonely, poetic characters and the very personal portraits Williams creates.

Reading at my current rather, ahem, advanced age I was surprised to see the social commentary underlying Williams' works. It's not obvious, but it's not exactly hidden. It added an all-new coloring to his works for me.

Not About Nightingales ** – This is an early play that lacks the polish and poetic touch of Williams' mature works. It is a somewhat stiff, episodic play attacking the poor conditions and treatment of prisoners. The characters are lively though unsurprising. The play moves rather rigidly through an endless series of scenes that go back and forth between the Warden's office and the prisoners. It's not bad for the completist or scholar, but Williams offers other more interesting plays for everyone else to read first.

A Streetcar Named Desire *** – Now, in the second half of my life (well, deeply in the second half of my life), I'm finally getting around to reading this famous work of American naturalism. I've never read it nor have I seen the movie. This is certainly the prodigy of Ibsen.

To me, a person's interpretation of the play hinges on whether they think Blanche is insane (and needs to go to an asylum) or if she was a victim of harsh circumstances that damaged her socially, and being unable to "fit in" was eventually "put away."

I believe the latter, and I think this play subtly makes the case for women's rights. In a culture dominated by men, a woman without a man is cast off. She is like a stray, with nowhere to go, with odd behavior learned while on the streets.

How things could have been different if Blanche (and even Stella) could have had independent lives, with independent means of existence, free from social stigma. Yes, Blanche made some poor choices, but what else was she to do?

Several hundred years ago, we burned female social outcasts. In the 1940s we just committed them. Today?

Jenny Clark says

Some were pretty good, some were not so good. I liked Camino Real a lot, it was quite interesting with the almost ethereal element to it. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof was pretty scathing, and A Streetcar Named Desire is a classic.

Overall, if you like plays, check out Williams works!

Ashley H. says

Every aspiring writer should read Tennessee Williams as he is the master at proving the notion that the best stories have simple plots, but complex characters. His dialogue is brilliant and each piece, no matter how

short or long, weaves a complete tale that leaves the reader emotionally devastated or inspired, or both. If you've never read plays before, don't be intimidated. They move quickly and with an active imagine, no meaning or impact is lost. I absolutely adored this collection.

Alan Teasley says

Reading selected plays for an OLLI course: "Something Unspoken," *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Camino Real*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Isadora Wagner says

I picked up the two-volume Library of America series because I am reading Williams chronologically. Even his lesser, unknown works completed when he was learning how to write plays move with power and beauty and life. There are some writers and artists who make one feel the full throb and ache of being human. Williams is such for me. Good medicine no matter what time of life.

J'Anne Jackman says

A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, Cat on Hot Tin Roof, Tennessee Williams is brilliant. He brings astonishing vulnerability to his people.

Erica says

We skipped around in this anthology. I have read: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, The Lady of Larkspur Lotion, Battle of Angels, and The Glass Menagerie. All of these plays were excellent, though I suppose my favorites were Battle of Angels and A Streetcar Named Desire. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was also great and I preferred the original Williams version over the Broadway version.
