

book review

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Becoming Tennessee

The young playwright's letters trace the origins of his art and his tragedy **By Robert Plunket**

It was Tennessee Williams's genius to take the pain at the very core of homosexuality—the loneliness of the outsider, the hurt inflicted by others—and make it universally understood. Straight businessmen at their annual visit to the theater, little old ladies at matinees—he touched them all and made them, for a moment anyway, kinder, more tolerant people.

He also touched many of the sailors in the audience, and it is this duality—the saintly poet, slightly debauched and foolish—that made him such an interesting character. In *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume I: 1920–1945*, the playwright's personality emerges slowly but with a clarity and humanity that will add much to his legend. At first, I admit, I found the letters rather ordinary. Many are prosaic communications with producers, would-be producers, his beloved grandparents, and celebrities he was trying to cultivate, and practically all concern his career. Then I realized they weren't about his career at all. They were about his art. And then they became fascinating.

The letters cover the period from 1920, when he was 8 years old, up to 1945, when *The Glass Menagerie* opened to great success on Broadway. Scattered throughout all of them are lines, phrases, incidents, and images—the detritus of his daily life—that will end up transformed by his art into icons of the modern theater. The story of his sister Rose, waiting



The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume I: 1920–1945 ■ Edited by Albert J. Devlin and Nancy M. Tischler ■ New Directions ■ \$37

at home for her gentlemen callers while slowly going mad, is perhaps the key motif in Williams's writings; she became not only Laura in *Menagerie* but also Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Catherine (the Elizabeth Taylor character) in *Suddenly, Last Summer*.

Doubtless as a result of all the tension in the Williams household, Tennessee became a compulsive traveler. As the postmarks attest, he was in constant motion: hitchhiking around the country, spending a month or two in New Orleans or Key West, out to Hollywood to try his hand at the movies. But wherever he was, the focus of his life was always his writing. Or, more accurately, his rewrit-

ing: Poems become stories, stories transform into plays, plays become screenplays, then stories, then plays again. Things did not come easy for Tennessee. But there are remarkably few moments of self-doubt, and there is, above all, an almost unlimited capacity to learn and to endure.

Besides work, the other constant in Williams's life was sex, and if the book has a flaw, it is that relatively few of the letters deal with his robust libido. (Fortunately, his letters to Donald Windham do deal with this subject and were published in 1977.) But some do, and they provide insights that are worth repeating. "The evils of promiscuity are exaggerated," he wrote in 1945. "Somebody said it has at least the advantage of making you take more baths. But I think one picks a rose from each person, each of a somewhat different scent and color."

The opening of *The Glass Menagerie* was both a beginning and end. It led to what Williams would come to call "the catastrophe of success," and his efforts to recapture his days as a struggling artist led to increasing use of drugs and alcohol. Letters from that period will no doubt be just as interesting as the ones in this book, but never again will we see Williams so pure, so full of youthful joy and pain. ■

Plunket is the author of My Search for Warren Harding and Love Junkie.

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