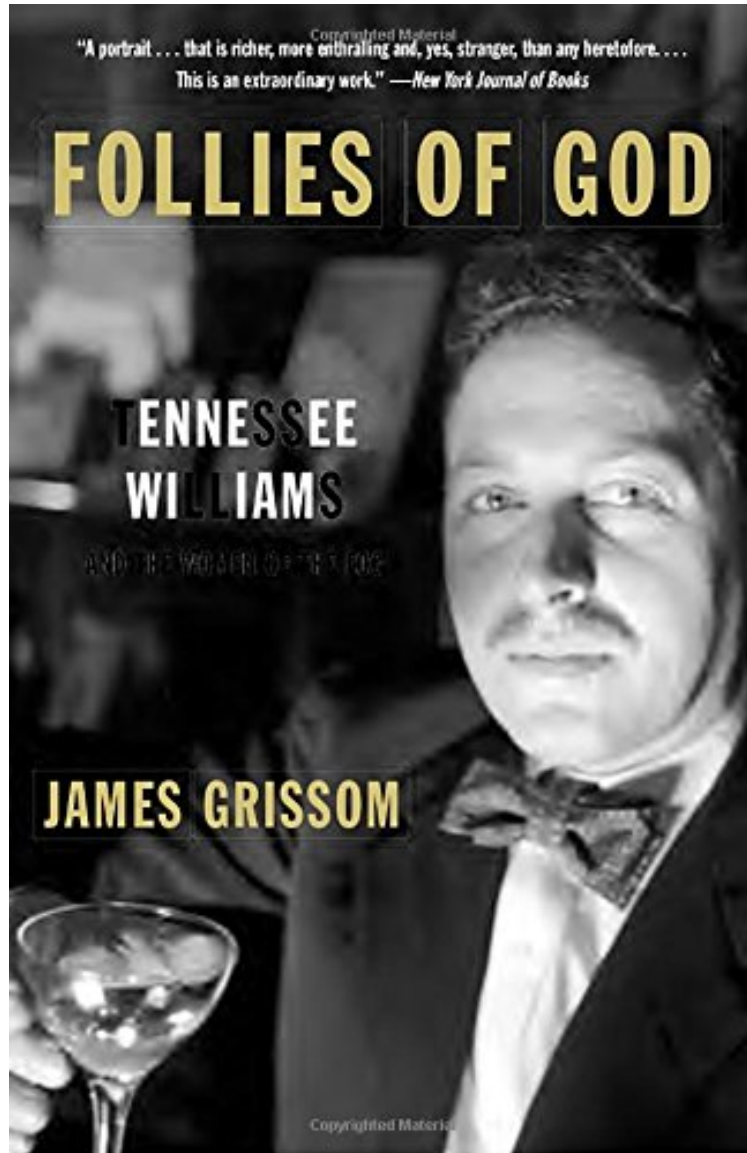


[Free] Follies of God: Tennessee Williams and the Women of the Fog

Follies of God: Tennessee Williams and the Women of the Fog

James Grissom

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James Grissom : Follies of God: Tennessee Williams and the Women of the Fog before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Follies of God: Tennessee Williams and the Women of the Fog:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Terrific book on Tennessee Williams and the actresses who inspired him By Joseph R. Meyers James Grissom took a huge chance by sharing so much of his research work on Facebook during the many years he spent putting together Follies of God, the fantastic new book about Tennessee Williams and

the actresses who inspired the playwright. Grissom's social network page has been full of wonderful excerpts from interviews he's done over the past four decades, generating a tremendous amount of buzz within the theatrical community, but also risking a feeling of déjà vu when we finally got our hands on the book itself. Well, *Follies of God* lives up to all of the anticipation Grissom has generated. The notes and thoughts he shared on Facebook over the past few years in no way diminish the experience of enjoying some of the best writing on theatre and actresses you will ever encounter. Indeed, much of the social network material turns out to have been background notes and show business digressions that didn't make it into the book. The project began more than 30 years ago when Grissom wrote a letter to the playwright and was invited to join Williams in New Orleans and then given an assignment to convey the writer's gratitude to the great performers such as Maureen Stapleton, Jessica Tandy and Katharine Hepburn who helped him create many of his most indelible characters. Grissom wrote down everything Williams said to him during those few days in 1982, and then was stunned by the writer's death the following year. The project was put aside for a while, as Grissom moved from Baton Rouge to New York and held down a variety of jobs. He had reams of comments that Williams wanted him to convey to the women of the fog but it took him many years to do the interviews and then construct a book which is part biography, part memoir and part actress profiles. Judging by the intimacy and depth of the interview material, Grissom established immediate trust in the actresses Williams sent him to. And as word got out about the project, other major figures, such as Marlon Brando, reached out to Grissom and spoke frankly about acting, Williams, the Actors Studio and many other theatre topics with remarkable candor. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. **BEST THEATRE BOOK EVER.** By Tomas DeMoss This is the best book I've ever read regarding the theatre and it offers incredible insights into Tennessee Williams and his female friends. Why he needed them. What he received from them. Don't expect a memoir or biography. He was born, lived and died. It's way more than that. If you are, like me, a playwright, this book acts as the best teacher you'll ever have. I don't read books more than once.... but I will this one. And more. Tomas 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. It's like crack. By Potter This is like literary crack. The best book there is about Tennessee Williams and his world. I was sorry when I reached the final page. I enjoyed it much more than John Lahr's *Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*. A masterful achievement by James Grissom.

This remarkably illuminating portrait of Tennessee Williams lifts the veil on the heart and soul of his artistic inspiration: the unspoken collaboration between playwright and actor. At a low moment in Williams's life, he summoned to New Orleans a young twenty-year-old writer, James Grissom, who had written him a letter asking for advice. After a long, intense conversation, Williams sent Grissom on a journey on his behalf to find out if he or his work had mattered to those who had so deeply mattered to him. Among the more than seventy women and men with whom Grissom talked were giants of American theater and film: Lillian Gish, (the escort who brought me to *Blanche*), Jessica Tandy (the original *Blanche DuBois* on Broadway), Eva Le Gallienne (She was a stone against which I could rub my talent and feel that it became sharper), Maureen Stapleton, Julie Harris, Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Elia Kazan, Marlon Brando, John Gielgud, and many more. *Follies of God* provides dazzling insight into how Williams conjured the dramatic characters and plays that so transformed American theater.

A portrait of Tennessee Williams that is richer, more enthralling and, yes, stranger, than any heretofore. . . . This is an extraordinary work. Not only for those who love theater, but also for those who would seek an understanding of the mind of the artist. *New York Journal of Books* Amazing and quite wonderful. . . . A unique and stirring examination of the profound effect of numerous talented actresses on Williams' memorable work. . . . Grissom's book is among the most surprising and provocative journeys into the soul of a writer. Peter Bogdanovich Grissom magically captures the vein and even voice of Tennessee in this beautifully written book about the actresses in his plays. Would that I had been one of them! There is no greater American playwright and *Follies of God* reveals why. Jane Alexander There have been plenty of books written about Williams over the past three decades, but few weave so many voices into an original and compelling portrait. Grissom honors the life and achievement of his doomed correspondent. Kirkus sA unique personal blend of road trip and literary history. . . . Philosophical, pragmatic, funny, and devastating. . . . Grissom has succeeded in creating a kaleidoscope meditation on the people who entered Williams' imagination the fog to become his signature characters. Publishers Weekly Imagine: a great playwright nearing the end of a troubled life charges a young writer with the quixotic task of tracking down the playwright's favorite actresses and finding out if he mattered to them. It sounds the stuff of fantasy. But young James Grissom took up Tennessee Williams' request and decades later has produced the result of that quest in an original, hypnotic, sui generis, bound-to-be-controversial document that becomes the history of his education as well as the illumination of ours. Thank you, James Grissom, for honoring the promise. John Guare, author of *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees of Separation* Extraordinary. . . Grissom manages the remarkable feat of unlocking the creative process of America's foremost dramatist. . . . A highly idiosyncratic journey into the nature of creativity. James Fisher, Theatre Library Association A great work. . . . It takes a humane artist to capture the quality of another, and Grissom is surely that. Gay City News Memorable. . . . Provides new and valuable insights into the playwright's psyche and life. Library Journal Grissom had amazing access

to Tennessee Williams and to the great actresses who starred in his plays. His revelations about these remarkable talents coping with the passage of time are moving and often shocking in their truths. A dazzling piece of writing. Lee Grant Always thoughtful, sometimes stunning, I see *Follies of God* as a kaleidoscope for viewing Tennessee Williams, and his time and place in American theater. A little turn, a new surprise, another view forms itself. There's nothing like it. Lois Smith Grissom's electrifying and wonderfully readable book is the real thing. He has caught the voice, the man, the artist, exactly as I remember him. . . . Few people have captured so well Tennessee's strange mixture of fear and admiration for women, his profound understanding (rare among men) of what drives them, their dominating presence in all his work, and his miraculous ability to work the magic of their strengths and weaknesses into some of the most powerful roles in the American theater. Michael Korda, author of *Clouds of Glory* Grissom's book is peerless . . . in both what it says about the creative sources of America's greatest playwright and in the way that it says it. . . . A magisterial summing up of a tormented soul for whom salvation was to be found only through language. . . . Reveals Williams to us fully as artist and human being a flawed, fearful, self-destructive, achingly vulnerable, gallant, forever questing pilgrim: a genius and a visionary who tragically could never seem to take the measure of his own unparalleled gifts. This is an unexpected masterpiece. Foster Hirsch, author of *Otto Preminger and The Dark Side of the Screen* About the Author JAMES GRISSOM studied at Louisiana State University and the University of Pennsylvania. He has written for HBO, Showtime, CBS, and NBC. He lives in New York. Jamesgrissom.blogspot.com Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. "Perhaps you can be of some help to me. These were the first words Tennessee Williams spoke to me in that initial phone call to my parents home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It was September of 1982, a fact I noted in a small blue book. The book was new and had been purchased for an upcoming test in World History that I would not be taking because Tennessee invited me to lunch in New Orleans, and I accepted. I know that pleasantries were exchanged, and he laughed a lot a deep, guttural, silly theatrical laugh but the first quotation attributable to Tennessee Williams to me was the one I wrote in my small blue book. Perhaps you can be of some help to me. How could I be of help to Tennessee Williams? How, when in fact I had written to him, several months before, seeking his help? From a battered paperback copy of *Whos Who in the American Theatre*, I had found the address of his agent (Audrey Wood, c/o International Famous Agency, 1301 Avenue of the Americas), and had written a letter lengthy and containing a photograph, and, I'm thankful, lost to us forever asking for his advice on a writing career. I wrote that his work had meant the most to me; that I was considering a career in the theater. I also enclosed two short stories, both written for a class taken at Louisiana State University. It was a time I recall as happy: I was writing, and exploiting the reserves of the school's library and its liberal sharing policy with other schools. I was poring over books and papers that related to Tennessee and other writers I admired. Tennessee (he told me, by the end of that first phone call, to call him Tenn) was in a horrible knot of time. He asked me to imagine a knot of time, but time for me at that point was something from which I was seeking favors, something I was approaching. I did not feel a part of time yet, which can be somewhat attributable to growing up and living in Baton Rouge, a city detached from time, thought, or curiosity. Tenn acknowledged with a laugh that Baton Rouge was a city encased in gelatin. Tenn, however, could see and feel a literal knot of time and people and places encircling him, choking him, pursuing him. While he told me that he could no longer dream, due to age, a lack of flexibility both glandular and creative, and the monumental accretion of toxins self-administered, he was, comically, fully equipped to endure nightmares. His most frequent nightmare, one he had endured the night before he chose to call me, consisted of his slow, painful death by means of a massive knot, bearing the image of an enormous boa constrictor as well as an artistic representation of a penis, encircling him and squeezing him into darkness and death. The scales of this boa were faces of people and covers of books and posters of plays (both his and others), travel brochures of trips planned, taken, aborted. The faces of the people and the blurbs on the books and the posters all posed the same question: Where have you been? This time knot was for Tenn a threat, an indictment, and a motivator, and he took it as a primarily positive occurrence. This thing, this horror, he told me, may very well allow me to write at my previous level of power, and it appears to be telling me to plunge into my memories, to plunder them. And those that are most vivid to me are in Louisiana. Tenn believed that writers, all artists, had several homes. There was the biological place of birth; the home in which one grew up, bore witness, fell apart. There was also the place where the epiphanies began a school, a church, perhaps a bed. Rockets were launched and an identity began to be set. There was the physical location where a writer sat each day and scribbled and hunted and pecked and dreamed and drank and cursed his way into a story or a play or a novel. Most importantly, however, there was the emotional, invisible, self-invented place where work began what Tenn called his mental theater, a cerebral proscenium stage upon which his characters walked and stumbled and remained locked forever in his memory, ready, he felt, to be called into action and help him again. I've got to get home. When Tennessee Williams was young, when he could dream and felt that time was a destination awaiting his arrival, he would repair to this mental theater, a safe place that operated under his management, where he could close his eyes and open the stage curtains and be not only home, but working. If you're a writer, you write. If you don't, you're dead. You have no home, no reason to be offered a seat at any table, and no reason to live. No play written by Tennessee Williams, however, got its bearings until a fog rolled across the boards, from which a female form emerged. I do not know why this is, Tenn confessed to me, but there is a premonitory

moment before a woman, an important, powerful woman, enters my subconscious, and this moment is announced by the arrival of fog. Perhaps it is some detritus of my brain belching forth both waste and a woman. I do not know, but it comes with a smell, and it is the crisp, pungent smell of radiators hissing and clanking and rattling in rooms in New Orleans and St. Louis and New York. Rooms in which I wrote and dreamed and starved and fucked and cried and read and prayed, and perhaps all that action and all that steam creates both this fog and this woman. I have not seen the fog in years. Tenn's primary activity, he told me, was faking the fog. When he closed his eyes and summoned his mental theater, he could see the scuffed boards of the stage, the frayed, slow-moving curtains, smell the dust, and feel the excitement of drama forthcoming. When I was young, Tenn told me, I never sought out a woman, a character. She came to me. She had a story to tell, urgently, violently, fervently. I listened and I identified, and I became her most ardent supporter and witness. I cannot get a witness for me and I cannot be a witness for anyone! I cannot find a woman who will speak to me on my stage. So Tenn sought the women elsewhere, searched for fog in movie theaters, on television screens, and in the pages of magazines, in stacks of photographs. He failed to find fog in literature, because, he explained, I am a very visual person. I need to have the shape and movement and intent of a woman before me. In his homes, in hotel rooms, in lodges and athletic clubs and as a guest of others, Tenn would pull out his typewriter or his pad of paper (which he called the pale judgment awaiting his ministrations), move close to a television set, and wait for a woman to speak to him. With friends like Maria St. Just and Jane Smith, whose love for and patience with him were boundless, he would sit in movie theaters for up to three consecutive showings, because a wisp of fog was emanating from the screen. I have not seen the fog in years, Tenn repeated. But your letter made me believe it still existed. Writing early in the morning or deep into the night, Tenn kept his television set on, the volume set to low, a radio or a phonograph playing the music of people who had led him to fog-enshrouded stages in the past. An image would come across the screen and catch his eye, the volume would be raised, and a voice would speak to him. Tenn had notes and diagrams and plot outlines scrawled on envelopes, napkins, hotel stationery, menus from restaurants and diners and airport lounges. Once, he delicately constructed a plot outline on a paper tablecloth, which the waiter neatly folded and presented to him along with the check. He consulted psychics, tarot-card readers, tea-leaf diviners. He placed himself in tubs of warm water and tried to experience rebirth, so that he could emerge from his liquid prison young and alert and full of creative and glandular flexibility, free forever of the impending time knot. Time and the ever-present pale judgment haunted him, jeered at him, reproached him. In the home of a friend, a fellow writer, he once walked over to a desk holding a ream of white paper and violently pushed it to the floor, then shoved it from view behind a desk. I will have none of that from you! he admonished the pile of paper, and went on with his visit. Where have you been? the scales of the time knot asked him. Well, where the hell have you been? Tenn once yelled out. I was very loyal to my women, to my plays, to the construct of words. Where are they? Oh, they're all on tour, baby, and I'm here with silence and clean air and a condemned theater. My heart and eyes are failing, but those gals are doing fine. In Tennessee's mind, Amanda and Blanche and Alma and Serafina and the Princess were errant daughters, each of whom who had been carefully listened to and coddled and husbanded by him, their queer Lear, and were now on stages telling their stories the stories that had come to him in the fog and he was off on his heath, yelling and whining and drinking and fighting off the time knot. Sometimes, he told me during that first phone call, I think the fog has been replaced by something else. I feel that there is a wind tunnel inside of my head, and inside my head, within my very brain, there are leaves flying about, and each leaf is an idea. When I finally met Tenn, he placed two fingers on his forehead, as if pushing against the pressure within, and he told me that the nights were spent scurrying after these leaves, trying to catch and collect them and find some meaning and comfort in them. He had also come to believe that the specks in his eyes, darting and floating, were reflections of these leaves moving across his brain, and if he could only marshal them, calm them down, and make the many dots one whole entity, he would have a character, a play, a woman, an idea. I am incapable of containing it, he told me, this mulch, this confetti, until I can find some form in which to place it. A shadow box of the cerebellum; a case of curiosities plucked from my subconscious; a brilliantly white page framed in gold that I can approach and admire for its order and cleanness and say to it, in front of it, Yes, I have something to add. Because he believed that the spots in his eyes, the floaters in his vitreous humor, were actually reflections of his cerebral leaf storm, Tenn took to staring into white tablecloths, looking upon blank white walls, and facing the sky, blinking and rolling his eyes, hoping to focus and find a connection. I've heard of connecting the dots, he laughed, but this is ridiculous. I try to approach the whiteness of the page, the pale judgment, as if I were a neophyte priest, and the paper is the host, Tenn confessed to me. I approach it gingerly and ask it to be patient. I see upon it the darting leaves in my brain, and I pray they will alight on the page and have some meaning. Or I touch it gently, a frightened queer faced with his first female breast, a nipple that seeks attention and ministration. Forgive me, I say to it, I don't know my way around these parts. I start with anything one lone sentence and I ask the leaves, I ask the page, for the next line, the next phrase. Sentence after sentence would follow, and Tenn would write them down, fervently, eagerly. Later, once we had met, once he had decided to trust me, I would write them down for him, and the bits of papers, the pages yanked from journals, and the old bills and envelopes all littered with words would pile up. I think we can help each other, Tenn told me in that first phone call.