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What Was He Reading?

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Editor's Note: *© 2005 Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival. This conversation with Professors Allean Hale and Nancy M. Tischler was recorded at the 2005 Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference. These two specialists, whose work represents some fifty years of devotion to the life and work of Williams, are uniquely qualified to discuss the reading habits of America's greatest playwright.*

Part I

Nancy M. Tischler

His Youthful Reading

Tennessee Williams was a prodigious reader from the beginning to the end of his days. Gore Vidal liked to pretend that Williams was not a reader, but a natural genius—a kind untutored noble savage. Actually, he read every day—and remembered much of what he read.

¶2 His early reading was wide and deep: he knew the classics, Shakespeare, the Romantics. He had memorized a lot of poetry and could quote bits of Shakespeare easily—and did so in his letters. The Reverend Dakin's library contained a rich assortment of learned books, and the young Tom read widely from these volumes during his extended visits with his grandparents. We also know a great deal about his reading from his writings—his plays, his stories, his poetry, his novels, and his letters. I suspect he read a lot of mythology, stories of the martyrs, and theological materials. His use of saints as heroes—often secular and damaged—has already been explored by scholars such as Judith Thompson and others.

¶3 He seems to have transformed Hart Crane into a secular saint—the artist as hero—early in his life. He never stopped reading his poetry and biographies of him, even recommending biographies to other correspondents. In his July 16, 1945, letter to Robert Penn Warren, Williams lamented that Crane had never been recorded reading his own poetry: "What a pity it seems to me that nobody ever got Hart Crane's voice, when so many canaries, finches, and sparrows have been shrilling their pipes off—there is not one peep from the nightengale" (sic).

¶4 Those reading lists that Allean Hale has discovered from his college days include most of the contemporary dramatists as well as the classics. Hints of Shaw, Pirandello, Eliot, Strindberg, Wilder, Ibsen, Chekhov, and numerous others are obvious in his plays. We also know that he read all of Shakespeare (and appeared in *Henry I V*), and he often structured his plays with classical mythology in mind.

¶5 Williams added to this accretive learning over the years by following the theatre productions in this country and in those countries where he traveled, especially in England and France. He became interested in Oriental theatre, in particular the Noh plays. He also seems to have been an eager reader of contemporary novels and poetry, as he often cites his readings in Yeats, Sartre, and Gide.

How He Used His Reading in His Work

This is not to suggest that he was a particularly derivative author. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he read with an eagle's eye, spotting things that would tantalize him. He would pick out interesting details, take them in, and let them mingle with the other experiences and ideas of his life in the "deep well of his unconsciousness." He

would then dredge them out, transformed, as a fresh bit of his own art. This process, described so richly by the Coleridge scholar John Livingston Lowes in his *The Road to Xanadu*, is a perfect description of Williams's creative process, the manner in which he transformed other people's ideas and images into his own.

¶7 Who would think, for instance, that Williams's youthful reading about *Don Quixote* would result in his making the fantastic hero a narrator for *Camino Real* years later? Or that reading the Bible and the myth of Orpheus—as well as the Greek plays about the Furies and the Eumenides— would become the key to transforming an early play such as *Battle of Angels* into *Orpheus Descending*? He found in the Greeks a mirror to his own troubled family, and he used the techniques of Greek theatre in a number of his plays. He loved the chorus as commentator as well as the theory of catharsis.

¶8 I would contend that Williams was better at writing about things he had read early in life than those he read more recently. When he "read up" for a play, the words were not quite his own. The failure of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, for which he read much of Hemingway and both Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, still sounds too much like the books he used. He had not made it his own material. The political material in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, derived in part from his extensive reading on Huey Long, rings artificial at best, as he never really got a convincing handle on the character of Boss Finley.

How We Know What He Read

The evidence is clear in Williams's journals and letters that he was constantly reading. We also know this through his writings, his myriad references to the Bible and the classics, to lyric poets, to the Romantics, to Shakespeare, to Baudelaire and Yeats—and even to the comic strips, such as Joe Palooka. Through the letters and journals we discover that he was a careful reader who reread books—such as Donald Windham's *The Hero Continues*. He read biographies (and recommended Crane's to New Directions publisher Jay Laughlin). He even read the wives of writers—like Zelda Fitzgerald and Frieda Lawrence. He studied translations, preferring one translation of Chekhov to another, as he noted in a letter about *The Sea Gull* to Paul Bigelow.

¶10 Unlike the women he met when visiting theatre producer Margo Jones in Dallas, he preferred thoughtful reading. He noted this in a June 1, 1945, letter to Guthrie McClintic: "I suspect they [the women] will embrace almost anything if it is presented to them as having 'smartness.' They suck up 'new books' like vacuum cleaners. In fact I don't see how it is possible to read that much that fast." He went on to laugh at their taste for the contemporary popular novel *Forever Amber*.

Why He Read

My own cynical view is that, if you had a mother like Edwina, you would become a reader, too. This might well explain his reading habit, developed as an escape from the noise and anger of his home. One of the reasons that Williams read so much later in life was that he could not sleep. That is also one reason he wrote so many letters. He would sit up well past midnight, when he could no longer write creatively (primarily a morning activity for him) and when he could no longer type without bothering the people in nearby rooms, and he would pick up a book. It made the hours pass more quickly and the insomnia bearable. In one of his letters, he laments that he could not find books in Key West, where he was staying. His relationship with his bibliographer Andreas Brown grew, in part, from Brown's eagerness to furnish him with boxes full of good reading materials. He sometimes asked his agent Audrey Wood for books he wanted to read. Books, it seems, were an addiction for him.

¶12 He often read with a purpose in mind: to understand himself, to get advice on what he should do, to prepare to meet people, to see how they lived and thought, to keep up with trends, and to get ideas for his own writing. Like seeing movies and plays, his reading was part of his "research" for his creative work.

¶13 At first he seemed to read a lot of letters and biographies of artists—as if he were trying to understand how to live. He certainly didn't want to replicate the prosaic life of his parents. Van Gogh, Vachel Lindsay, D.H. and Frieda Lawrence, Hart Crane, and others taught him something about the struggles of the artistic life. Their letters appear to have inspired his own letter-writing habit. Their triumphs appear to have given him hope. This reading also gave him material for numerous stories and plays about "The Poet," continuing into his later studies of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda.

¶14 When he first hungered after the "sweet smell of success," he read contemporary poetry and short story magazines to prepare for competition. We know he had been reading *Story* magazine for some time and even *Weird Tales*, according to his publication record. He started reading *The New Yorker* and *View*—a surrealist magazine that published such friends as Donald Windham. At Provincetown, he came to know many of these magazine contributors and thought he might be able to write poetry that would interest them, but he was soon disillusioned, as he was not interested in what he regarded as their particular brand of opaque verse.

¶15 When he met different artists he read their works, trying to know them better through this process. Jay Laughlin, for example, set him to reading the New Directions series, in which he was published. He was far more impressed by Jay as a man and sponsor than as a poet, but he read the magazines carefully and commented on different stories and poems he found in them. He read Oliver Evans's works, often complimenting them. References to specific poems pepper his correspondence with Evans. He seems to have already read Isherwood before they became friends in California, and he had read some of Gore Vidal's work before they met in Rome. He continued to read everything Vidal wrote as soon as it was published—even giving advice on his ideas for a play. Carson McCullers, William Inge, Paul Bowles, Jane Bowles, and numerous other contemporary figures became part of his life and part of his reading. It probably gave this shy man something to say to people when they met. He saw writing as a form of self-revelation.

¶16 Sometimes he read out of curiosity, or eagerness to attack. He could not miss a Truman Capote book and enjoyed praising his other companions' work over Truman's. He in fact overpraised his friends (like Donald Windham and Oliver Evans) and undervalued his competitors or enemies, such as Thornton Wilder. He was an emotional, visceral reader. But he was also a serious critic, willing to give advice to other writers—McCullers, Vidal, Inge, Oliver Evans, and even William Carlos Williams. Although he was willing to encourage other fledgling writers, he was also protective of his position as "king of the mountain" and more temperate in his praise for those who challenged him.

¶17 Sometimes he read to flesh out ideas for plays. For example, when working on *Big Time Operators* (an early fragment of *Sweet Bird of Youth*) he read extensively. His letters to Audrey Wood regarding his plans for writing about Huey Long plead for books about the politician. But then he read the reviews and probably the novel by Robert Penn Warren—*All the King's Men*. He knew he could not eclipse Warren and did not even try. He did not seem to have been particularly interested in Warren or the other Fugitives in his mature years, even though he shared a number of their ideas and influences. In editing *The Selected Letters*, the only letter we found to Robert Penn Warren was in response to a request for a recorded reading to be held by the Library of Congress.

¶18

Late in life, he read to stay *au courant*. With the help of Andreas Brown, he unpacked boxes of the latest books, reading them and commenting on them. He continued to read poetry, stories, and plays. Friends would recommend books, and he would read them. He told Jay Laughlin, for instance, that he was "becoming infected with your passion for Kafka, since reading 'The Burrow'. It is so like our State Department" He complained to friends when he could not find a good bookstore in the town he was staying.

¶19 He also read the criticism. We know he wrote back to critics of his plays and novels; we have records of long discussions with Brooks Atkinson as well as angry attacks against those who failed to understand his plays. With some critics, he took time to explain himself so that he could change their views—and their writing. He was equally sensitive about criticism of his friends' works, lashing out at critics. He even read the criticism in weekly news magazines, especially *Time*, from which he seemed to get most of his news.

¶20 He was deeply distressed with premature reports of his death as a writer, especially such cruel pronouncements as the one in *Life*: "Mr. Williams—He Dead." He would have roared with laughter when these same magazines applauded him graciously as the "Laureate of the Lost"—after he died. I was amazed to find, when I sorted through his books at the Ransom Center, that he had read the first of my books about him—and had marked some of the errors in the margin with a firm "X." I wish he had written me.

¶21 So there you have it—a man thought to be a primitive artist, writing out of his own experience, who had great difficulty in expressing his thoughts in person, who wrote with the voice of the common man, and who had terrible eyesight most of his life. To set the record straight, this was a man who was one of the literary world's most voracious readers.

Part II

Allean Hale

¶22 Gore Vidal once said that "Tennessee Williams seldom read a book," to which Williams replied, "He means I seldom read one of his." Actually, he read voraciously, everything from *The National Enquirer* to the Episcopal prayer book. "Read" is perhaps not quite the right word. "Absorbed" might be better, for he had the gift of going straight to the heart of the matter. Regarding Williams's favorite authors, most of us would immediately name Hart Crane and Chekhov, his cradle-to-grave companions. But I tend to think that his favorite subject was whatever he was reading at the time, especially if it was something that created a spark in his mind. Not that Williams copied others directly, but when he admired a work, it inspired him to think how he would have handled the same subject.

¶23 I assume that our panel title, "What Tennessee Williams Read," implies how his reading affected what he wrote as well as how specific authors influenced him. I want to start with his childhood and with a book few have ever heard of. When Williams's mother's house was sold in St. Louis, the family books found in the basement were given to Washington University and are now in their Special Collections. I looked through these to try to discover which ones Williams may have read. Sometimes this was easy, as he tended to write his reactions on the end papers. Among these books was a large volume, *The Crown Jewels of Art*, the sort of picture book a child would have explored. The illustrations were in black and white, but they sparked instant recognition. Here was the Apollo Belvedere (the ultimate classic Greek male nude), Albrecht Durer's *The Crucifixion*, the Sistine Madonna, and the Gustave Doré work entitled *Christian Martyrs*, (one of his mother Edwina's favorite phrases), all of which anticipated Tennessee Williams's most ubiquitous themes. Stanley

Kowalski was only the first of his males with "a body like a Greek god," and crucifixes occur in his plays from that of Val in *Battle of Angels* to Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana*. The nameless Girl in *Stairs to the Roof* is referred to at one point as resembling a Madonna, and Williams's play, *Portrait of a Madonna*, makes the allusion specific. The Virgin Mary actually appears in *The Mutilated.* "You're just a Christian martyr" is Amanda's refrain in *The Glass Menagerie*.

¶24 Tom was a precocious reader from childhood, devouring the Greek myths and all of Shakespeare before he was twelve. *Titus Andronicus* was his favorite, in which Lavinia is raped, has her tongue cut out, and her hands cut off. Then the Queen of the Goths unwittingly eats her sons baked in a pie. Little wonder that the grotesque figures prominently throughout Williams's works. As Tom grew older, I suspect that he was attracted to books which either reflected his own situation or gave him material for his plays. D.H. Lawrence became an early influence because Williams saw his own mother-son entanglement in the life and works of Lawrence. *Orpheus Descending* reflects Lawrence, while *You Touched Me* is a direct derivation. Interviewed by the school paper when he entered Missouri University at age eighteen, Tom said that his favorite book was *The Green Bay Tree*. This was perhaps for shock effect rather than truth, but it is interesting that its subject is a homosexual, when the word was scarcely known. Williams himself did not come out until ten years later.

¶25 Somerset Maugham was considered the great writer of the thirties, and Tom's first play, *Beauty is the Word*, written for the Missouri Workshop's Dramatic Arts playwriting contest, was frankly inspired by the film of Maugham's play, *Rain*. Students planning to enter the Missouri playwriting contest (one that Tom did enter twice) were offered a reading list of the twenty best American, British/Irish and Continental one-act plays. While he probably did not read all sixty, it was doubtless here that he first encountered Yeats, Shaw, Strindberg, Paul Green, and O'Neill. *Bound East for Cardiff*, *In the Zone*, and *Ile*were recommended and were evidently the source for the sailors, girls, and setting of Williams's first produced play, *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* Its young merchant sailor would evolve into Tom of *The Glass Menagerie* and would be reprised in the character of Sailor Jack in *Not About Nightingales*. O'Neill's *Anna Christie* may explain Tom's own early portraits of prostitutes, with whom he had had no experience. He undoubtedly saw the Workshop's expressionistic production of *The Hairy Ape*, which has echoes in Blanche's tirade against Stanley as an "ape" in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

¶26 Tom's nervous breakdown at age twenty-four not only freed him from the shoe factory but introduced him to Chekhov, whom he read during the summer of 1935 while recovering at his grandparents' home in Memphis. Chekhov would become a lifelong influence, from *The Glass Menagerie* to *The Notebook of Trigorin*, Williams's modernization of *The Sea Gull* written shortly before he died. But that fall of 1935, when he returned to St. Louis to enroll in Washington University, Tom was to get a more pedantic view of his hero through a class in Principles and Problems of Literature taught by a formidable German professor, Dr. Heller, a specialist in Ibsen and Chekhov. Tom's long and enthusiastic term paper on Chekhov for this class was marked with comments from Heller: "No page numbers!" and "This in no way fulfills the requirements of a term paper as indicated repeatedly." It was probably this demanding professor who furthered Tom's interest in both Ibsen and Strindberg. Williams's first draft of *Spring Storm* ends much like Ibsen's *Ghosts*, with Heavenly reducing Arthur to a zombie as she makes him repeat soothing lines after her. The Strindberg influence is suggested by a quote from the poet that Tom wrote in the back of a school book: "They call it love, and it hails from the pit." *A Streetcar Named Desire* is perhaps his most Strindbergian play; like *Miss Julie* it ends with a fatal incident between an upper-class woman and a working-class man.

¶27 It was at Washington University that Tom met the school poet and French scholar, Clark Mills, who introduced him to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Verlaine, along with Lorca and Rilke. It was from the Washington U library that Tom appropriated the copy of Hart Crane he would carry with him most of his life. Williams, in fact, would write a play with Rimbaud and Verlaine as characters. Less well known was his lifelong devotion to Rilke, whose *Sonnets to Orpheus* are invoked in both *Orpheus Descending* and the unicorn symbolism of *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams's 1983 *Three Plays for the Lyric Theatre* are dedicated to Rilke. Tom had thought of himself as a poet, until while at Washington University he became involved with The Mummers, the St. Louis radical theatre group whose semi-professional productions introduced him to playwriting as a career. His Mummers plays of the mid-thirties demonstrate the influence of master-playwrights of the day. *Fugitive Kind* borrows its plot from Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*. The setting of *Stairs to the Roof* recalls Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*. *Not About Nightingales* illustrates the newspaper technique of the WPA theatre endorsed at the University of Iowa, where Tom went in 1936 to study playwriting.

¶28 At Iowa he was confronted by a list of ninety plays which students were expected to read. It is probable that Tom did indeed read these, because students were tested on them every two weeks. These covered plays as light as Sardou's *The Scrap of Paper* and as mysterious as Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Both may have left an imprint on Williams. A letter is prominent in his *House Not Meant to Stand*; his *Two-Character Play* has a touch of Pirandello, as does Williams's metadramatic play-within-a-play in an unpublished version of *Vieux Carré*. The reading lists introduced current playwrights Maxwell Anderson, Paul Green, Elmer Rice, and Robert Sherwood, all of whom left echoes in Williams, but again the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, and O'Neill are the most prominent on the list and are those which would affect Tom most deeply. At Iowa, assigned to write a biographical play, he chose Van Gogh as subject and recorded that he had on his desk five volumes of Van Gogh letters and biographies. Tom was attracted to memoirs of persons who went insane, doubtless because of his sister and his own fear of losing his mind. Later he would read the memoirs of the dancer Nijinski, who, like Rose, was a paranoid schizophrenic.

¶29 These school reading lists suggest something about Tennessee Williams's reading that is generally overlooked: the influence of European writers. In a semester at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1940 where he studied under Piscator, Williams was introduced to the work of Brecht. Although dramaturgical theories such as alienation would never be Williams's style, he absorbed and used Brechtian ideas of stagecraft and would always maintain that, with the exception of *The Sea Gull, Mother Courage* was the greatest play ever written. At this time, Williams's first ventures out of the United States (inspired by D.H. Lawrence) were to Mexico. These were especially productive. The Spanish influence shows in *The Purification*, his tribute to Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, *Camino Real* (with Don Quixote as a character), and *The Night of the Iguana*.

¶30 Continental playwrights introduced Williams to new concepts of writing, from surrealism to existentialism. After the success of *Streetcar* in 1948, he spent long periods abroad for the rest of his life. He had studied French in high school and college and was well acquainted with the work—and sometimes the authors—of French drama in particular. In the fifties he read Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and declared it was the funniest play he had ever read, but found it so outrageous that no American theatre would produce it. It was cartoonish surrealism, but the interesting fact is that a camp comedy Williams wrote in the sixties, *Kirche, Küche Und Kinder*, is much like it in spirit. He knew Cocteau, who directed the French performance of *Streetcar*. Cocteau's film, *Beauty*

and the Beast, seems to have inspired the carnival scene in *Stairs to the Roof*. He admired Sartre's *No Exit* and had much the same existential attitude toward life as did Camus and Sartre. In 1948 Williams wrote from France to Carson McCullers: "I read a good book by Jean Paul Sartre called *The Age of Reason* . . . It is badly written, in a way, but is a terrifyingly keen analysis of mental processes and emotions. . . . Do you like physics? I am reading a lot about astronomical physics and relativity and so forth as it really exercises the . . . imagination to think about these things . . ."

¶31 Williams's acquaintance with the work of Proust is suggested in *Camino Real*. Before he wrote this play he claimed he also read all the journals of Casanova, the world's greatest lover. He helped introduce Beckett to America by putting money into the premiere production of *Waiting For Godot* in Miami on January 3, 1956. Williams's late work, *The Two Character Play*, would often be compared to Beckett. Williams read both Genet and Ionesco, but his attitude towards them is more difficult to establish. He once remarked, "I don't much like Ionesco"—but that may have been a dodge. Although once he sat near Genet in a restaurant and appeared not to know him, a copy of Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, inscribed by the author to Williams, exists in the Columbia University archives. When Genet's play, *Les Negres*, was being translated into English for its New York premiere in 1961, there was debate over the title. Williams, appalled upon hearing that the play might be called *The Niggers*, said that would be "suicidal," evidently adding his weight to the translator's preference, *The Blacks*. Scholar Linda Dorff has suggested that Williams's *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* may allude to Jean Genet's *The Balcony* in its physical setting, its dominant woman character, its plot of approaching revolution, and its conquering General. However, *This Is* relates much more to Ionesco in spirit. Where in *The Balcony* the mirrors before which actors change both costumes and characters emphasize the play's theme of illusion, in *This Is*, the Countess's continual dressing and undressing amounts to a strip tease. Surrealist and absurd, *This Is* even borrows the Ionesco scene from *Amadée or How to Get Rid of It* of the husband being lifted into the air by a balloon. Among unfinished scripts in Columbia University's Rare Book (Williams) Collection are his typewritten pages from a script entitled *Aimez-Vous Ionesco*, too fragmented to publish or even to invoke an opinion. However, there is an enlightening remark in a September 27, 1962, letter Williams wrote to James Laughlin about *The Gnädiges Fräulein*: "I am also finishing up two long-short . . . plays under the common title of 'Two Slapstick Tragedies.' I think they have a new quality for me, perhaps they're my answer to the school of Ionesco. . . ." So in the early sixties Williams fittingly entered the "Theatre of the Absurd," and if the critics had better understood his French-inspired "outrageous" plays of the next few years, he might have received better reviews. The one playwright of this "new wave" for whom Williams had a jealous admiration was not French, but British: Harold Pinter. His dramatic use of silence was a characteristic Williams could never achieve, although in some of his one acts, such as *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*, the verbal voids do seem similar to Pinter's elliptical dialogue.

¶32 Williams said, "One of the few lady writers that I like to read—a marvelously witty English writer" (actually Scottish) was Muriel Sparks, whom Williams described in his 1962 letter to Jay Laughlin. "She is sort of like Mary McCarthy would be if Mary had a narrative gift and a sense of character, however mordant, and she is just about the only contemporary novelist that Mary couldn't put down on her own critical terms."

¶33 By the 1960s Williams's fame had encouraged the imitation of younger rivals whose work he either read or saw. Edward Albee dared to satirize Williams in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and when Arthur Kopit wrote his parody on the Oedipal complex, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad! Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So*

Sad, Williams apparently felt that it satirized his plays as well. “I wish Kopit would drop it,” he said. In 1959, tired of both the United States and Europe, Williams sailed to the Orient. In Japan he visited Yukio Mishima and became enthusiastic about Kabuki theatre. Seeing Kabuki and reading Noh plays would influence him to adopt a new and generally misunderstood style: the use of chanted speeches, the unfinished sentences which attempted to imitate Noh’s pregnant silences. He even wrote his own version of a Noh play, *The Day on Which a Man Dies*, which became *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. His short play, *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow*, shows direct Noh influence from its two characters, white cranes, emphasis on repetition and silence, to its subject of death. A touch of Kabuki remains in *Milk Train*, with its Kabuki stage assistants, kimonos, and fans; while Noh is suggested in the very title of *The Two-Character Play*. These oriental attempts were generally misunderstood or panned, as critics again failed to appreciate Williams’s more experimental drama. When Mishima commited seppuku, Williams, perhaps anticipating his own death, explained the act as that of a writer who felt his work was finished.

¶34 Near the end of his life, Williams wrote what he called his first biographical play, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, for which he read the lives and works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and especially Zelda. Still, the play’s effect is ultimately autobiographical. In demonstrating how much of Fitzgerald’s work was owed to Zelda, Williams was perhaps questioning his own lifelong use of his sister Rose as a subject. *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981) is frankly autobiographical, a confessional tribute to his youthful lover, Kip Kiernan. Before he died, Willliams came back to Rilke, and a remembered verse from the First Elegy which perhaps reflects his own concerns:

> True, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer . . .
> to be no longer all that one used to be. . . .

Evidently Tennessee Williams must have been reading up to the hour he died, for on the bed where he had been lying there was a photocopy of “Some of These Days,” a short story by his friend James Purdy.