

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Book Review:

The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia

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Philip C. Kolin, ed. *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004. \$89.95.

In bringing together a host of seasoned and new scholars and assigning them a vast array of topics, Philip Kolin has performed a great service. *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia* summarizes much of the scholarship on Williams, including the extended studies of the past half century and the more targeted investigations of the two decades since his death. Scholars will find it a perfect place to begin research on any number of topics, and Williams devotees will discover sources and connections that might have eluded them prior to this volume. Here are the people, places, works, ideas, and themes that shaped Williams's work.

¶12 This *Encyclopedia* features a felicitous blend of scholarship, with entries reflecting the expertise of individual authors. Allean Hale writes about plays she has edited and about St. Louis as a key to Williams's imagery; Al Devlin contributes insights into the collections of letters; John Clum discusses gender and sexuality; Ralph Voss explores Williams's ties to Inge; Nicholas Moschovakis writes knowingly about the poems; and others, including Robert Bray, Richard Kramer, Brian Parker, Tom Keith, and Jacqueline O'Connor, contribute their own special knowledge to the collection. This long list of Williams experts results in a variegated and distinguished study that will be useful for several decades to come.

¶13 Although many of the essays strike familiar themes, as we would expect in an encyclopedia, unfamiliar items occasionally delight the reader. I had not read the newly published work "The Night Was Full of Hours" and was pleased to have such a full summary of its contents. The *Encyclopedia* also offers fresh perspectives on better-known materials. For instance, Margaret Thornton, the editor of Williams's journals, has this to say about Williams's dreams:

He dreams about missing a bus that his sister is on. He manages to stop the bus, but the case containing his manuscripts is not on it. He dreams of seeing his sister in a cream-colored dress, and then discovers he is wearing the same dress. He tries to sit down between two tables, but they are wedged so tightly together that he cannot breathe. (106)

Having read and edited so many of his letters and journals, I was delighted to discover in this recalled dream a summary of his complex relationship with Rose, his habit of scattering manuscripts in his wake as he traveled the world, Rose's obsession with clothing, and hints of his claustrophobia and general hysteria. This particular selection whets one's appetite to see the entire collection of journals on which Thornton has so long labored.

¶14 The ever-changing landscape obstructs any attempt to encapsulate Williams scholarship. Not only is Thornton still at work on the Journals, but Brian Parker is still poring over the many variants of the Williams plays (to be published in *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*), and Al Devlin is annotating the hundreds of remaining letters that should appear in the next volumes of *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*. New editions of Williams's earliest and latest plays are currently being planned by Peggy Fox at New Directions. Studies of the late plays and of the Hollywood films are also on the way.

¶15 In addition, there are great new opportunities for scholarship opening up: Michael Paller mentions that Williams's psychiatrist, Lawrence Kubie, made audio recordings of his psychiatric sessions (119), although we cannot know when, or whether, the sessions will become available for study. The Elia Kazan files at Wesleyan University in Connecticut have finally been opened to scholars, albeit on a very limited basis; and a few of these items will be incorporated in volume II of the *Letters*. Additional materials illuminating Williams's relationship with Kazan—as well as with Carson McCullers, Frank Merlo, Arthur Miller, and many others—will doubtless become available in the near future as archives acquire new collections and open others that have long been sealed.

¶16 These new revelations will continue to complicate our understanding of Williams. For example, the famous letter Williams wrote to the State Department defending Arthur Miller, who had lost his passport (p. 151), ended on the desk of Audrey Wood. An attached note suggests that perhaps the letter should not be mailed, leaving the final decision in Wood's hands (TW to AW, TLS, c. April 1, 1954, HRC). Williams, who was fond of Miller but also jealous of him, showed both audacity and timidity in a single political gesture—a very revealing action. Nothing in his life was ever simple.

¶17 Such revelations will, in time, modify some of the entries in the *Encyclopedia* but not diminish the work's value. After all, scholarly investigation is, by its nature, a moveable feast. What we think we know is soon replaced by a new approach, a new discovery, and a new conclusion, themselves superseded in turn. Bringing together so many ideas and insights as Kolin does in this *Encyclopedia* is well worth the effort. It helps us all to achieve an overview of the current status of Williams studies. After all, this Dionysian spirit (see Clark's essay on "Mythology") refuses to be captured and codified. Our temptation is to try to pin the wriggling Williams on the page for study—like Prufrock, a butterfly "formulated, sprawling on a pin." He is far too lively a writer to permit such treatment.

¶18 This book is enormously useful, attractive, and readable. The photographs are well chosen. The cross references and selected bibliographies, the production histories, chronologies, and details of composition will save many scholars both time and labor in the future. We are grateful to the army of contributors and their editor-in-chief for making this available to us.