
Margaret Bradham Thornton. *Tennessee Williams' Notebooks*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 765p.

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Notebooks, a compilation of Tennessee Williams' personal journals, photographs, letters, and poetry, intimately illuminates the playwright's disparaging self-reflections and simultaneous desire for literary success. Williams metamorphoses from elation to despair, lamenting his father's blatant disregard for him and his sister's mental deterioration. Amidst the sadness of his home life, the author always manages to return to it, in particular to his supportive mother and to "Grand." His natural surroundings, companionships with other writers, and his eventual success with several critically hailed plays, serve to boost Williams to hope for more and to question the meaning of life and his place within it.

Margaret Bradham Thornton, the editor of this volume, spent ten years arranging Williams' text and letters next to a series of complimentary annotations and photographs that identify and highlight the playwright's friends and social circles. Unfortunately, Williams did not always mark notations as to what year and month the entries were written. Thornton journeyed to archives located in Texas, Columbia, Yale, and Harvard in order to ascertain the dates of each piece of writing. Because the playwright voraciously wrote letters to his friends and acquaintances, Thornton contacted the mentioned persons and scheduled interviews with them in order to solidify the placement of each entry.

In other instances, the data was difficult to discover; she consequently turned to extensive databases from companies like Goldman Sachs. Once organized and properly arranged, Thornton was able to examine the actual content in terms of the precarious emotional journey Williams suffered for the entirety of his life. She observes that "The idea that Williams was always wavering on the brink of insanity seemed false to me." Inspired by the perplexing juxtaposition of Williams' lamentations and his seemingly stabilized self-presentation, she consulted Paul Bowles and asked his opinion of the playwright. He explained: "Look at all that he wrote. Tenn knew exactly what he was doing." The "wretched whining" of Williams as he struggled to preserve his mental health, according to Thornton, emerges as a form of indulgence rather than a suicidal tendency.

Thornton's meticulous preparation of *Notebooks* significantly overshadows other compilations of authors' journals, memoirs, or personal letters. In comparison to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Frances McCullough, and *Henry James's Letters*, edited by Leon Edel, for example, Thornton's treatment is far more thorough, supplying the reader with explanatory notes on the left page that explain Williams'

references on the right page. Because of Thornton's extensive, detailed list of "clues," the playwright's journals gain greater significance. In other words, instead of a few footnotes or endnotes that supply the reader with a referent's identity and significance, Thornton furnishes this type of information as well as excerpts from interviews with Williams' mentioned friends. She places photographs of the people at the time Williams knew them next to the entry, and she arranges Williams' original entries to correspond with his additional "responses" to them. Each perusal of the pages becomes a moment where the past comes alive through the playwright's voiced despair over poor critical reception, lovesickness over "K," and his physical wanderings throughout the United States and Europe.

The journal captures more than Williams' emotional state, but extends to the reader the opportunity of peering into his work from the playwright's own perspective and intent. Before Williams energetically attached himself to the production of plays, he created short stories that his classes at Washington University "criticized...very harshly" and poetry that disappointed him immensely. Once his plays gained momentum and eventual audience acclaim, Williams appears to experience reasonably good spirits. Yet his change of spirit often denotes a transition in his private life in the sense that he continually strives to obtain quality in his work, hoping that perfection will ameliorate his disillusionment with himself.

Gaining acknowledgement from his peers, an elusive element in his relationship with Clark Mills McBurney, proves equally evasive as Williams journeys south to Key West, losing himself financially because of infrequent recognition and payment as well as debaucherous evenings with unidentified lovers. Thornton's summaries between the notebooks illustrates that life imitates art when she observes that "The audience was offended by the explicit sexuality [in *Battle of Angels*] and irritated by the final scene in which smoke billowed out into the theater" (217). Much like Williams' erotic adventures that he narrates in his letters to Donald Wildham and others, the playwright did not censure the content of his plays, offering the audience a brutal depiction of the down-and-outs, the lonely, and the confused. *Notebooks* becomes the development of a man's interior being, his subsequent literary creations, and his sexuality.

Thornton's painstaking arrangement of Tennessee Williams' *Notebooks* creates the sensation that the reader is becoming a part of the past. The evolution of the photographs of his mother and sister and Williams himself details the passing of a life in all its finery, brilliance, and artistry. Decades are fleshed out, bringing alive a world war, along with the literary and acting circles of greats like Gore Vidal, Marlon Brando, and Jessica Tandy. Her work, an adventurous resurrection of the

past, offers a variety of readers honest and uncensored insight into the making of an extraordinary artist in twentieth-century America. ✱