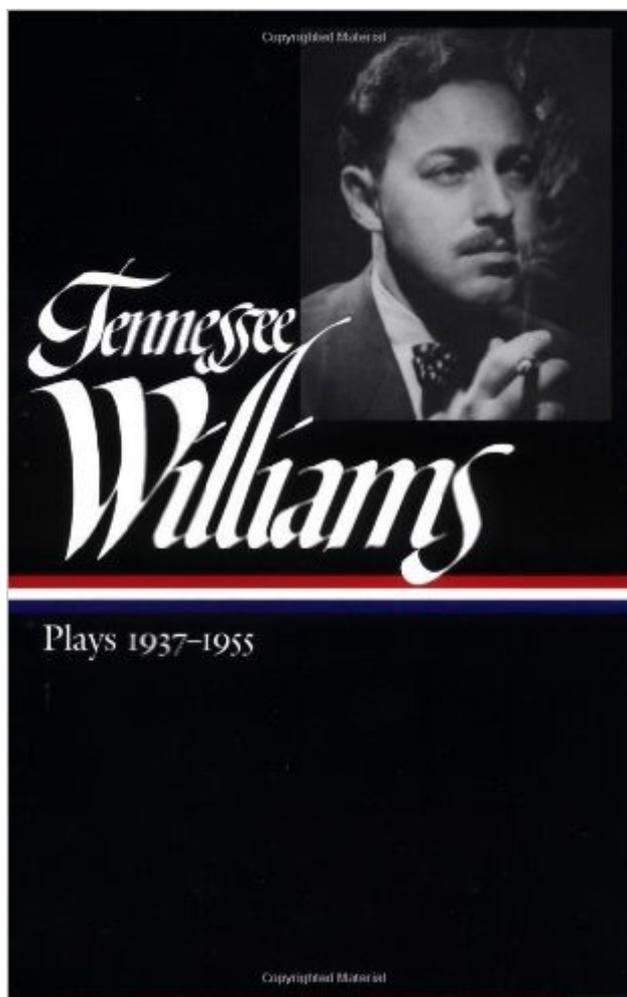


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Tennessee Williams: Plays 1937-1955 (Library Of America)



Synopsis

Tennessee Williams's explosive, often violent, plays shattered conventional proprieties and transformed the American stage. They inspired some of the most famous productions and performances in theatrical and film history, and they continue to grip audiences all over the world. Now, in an authoritative two-volume edition, The Library of America collects the plays that define Williams's extraordinary range and achievement. This first volume begins with the stunning rediscovered plays of Williams's early career: *Spring Storm*, a tragedy of provincial longing that prefigures the mood and language of his later work, and *Not About Nightingales*, a stark prison drama, produced in 1998 to international acclaim, that resounds with the playwright's outraged idealism. With the autobiographical *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, Williams attained what he later called "the catastrophe of success," a success made all the greater by *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his most famous play and one of the most influential works of modern American literature. Forging an idiom that uniquely blended lyricism and brutality, a tragic sense of life and a genius for comic observation, he continued to revolutionize the American theater with a series of masterpieces: the poignant and melancholy *Summer and Smoke*, the light-hearted erotic comedy *The Rose Tattoo*, the sprawling and surrealistic *Camino Real*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning portrayal of a ruthless family struggle. This volume also contains *Battle of Angels* (an early version of *Orpheus Descending*), and a selection of Williams's one-act plays, including *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, *The Property Is Condemned*, and *I Rise in Flame*, *Cried the Phoenix*, a meditation on the life and work of D. H. Lawrence. This edition includes a newly researched chronology of Tennessee Williams's life, explanatory notes (including cast lists of many of the original productions), and an essay on the texts.

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Customer Reviews

The new Library of America volume "Tennessee Williams: Plays, 1937-1955" is the first of two volumes. (The second volume covers the plays from 1957 to 1980.) This is a magnificent book, beautifully printed and bound. It is comprehensive (over 1000 pages) and has extensive notes and a complete chronology of Williams's life. Several of the plays are printed with commentaries by Tennessee Williams himself, essays that are very informative. This book belongs in the library of any fan of American theater. If you have only seen the several movies made in the 1950's from his plays, reading these will prove a revelation for you. Because of the restrictions put on movies in the 50's, most of his works were deeply expurgated, especially any overt references to homosexuality. So reading the original plays here often reveals underlying previously obscure motivations/conflicts of some of the characters: why, for example, Blanche DuBois had fallen from being a privileged Southern Belle to the pathetic wretch who appeared on Stanley and Stella's doorstep. Unlike many playwrights, Tennessee Williams tended to give long, detailed stage directions. This gives the reader of the plays a novel-like narrative, making them wonderful experiences for readers who do not ordinarily enjoy reading plays. The sensuous atmosphere, the classical -- almost Greek sense of tragedy that looms in almost all of these plays, and the exquisite use of language make this a unique reading experience. The writers who had influence over Williams's style are never named but seem apparent, at least to this reader. For example, when reading "The Rose Tattoo" I was reminded of the great Spanish poet/playwright Garcia Lorca's "House of Bernarda Alba."

I first got to know some of the plays of Tennessee Williams (1911 -- 1983) in the mid-1960s, and I have revisited his works often over the years. Last year, I had the opportunity to read John Lahr's biography, "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" (2014) which revitalized my interest in Williams. I decided to read or to reread Williams, using what I had learned from Lahr, in the Library of America two-volume collection of his plays. The first LOA volume, which I am reviewing here, consists of plays written between 1937 and 1955 as selected by two scholars of Williams: Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holditch. The volume includes a chronology of Williams' life, and information on the original productions and editions of the plays in addition to the texts. Williams' works have

always moved me with their beautifully flowing lyricism, their romanticism, and sexuality and with the tension they dramatize between convention and individuality, religion and sex, love and violence. The boundaries of some of these tensions have changed since the 1940s and 1950s, but I think Williams stories, characters, and dilemmas are independent of particular times. They are also highly personal and autobiographical. At the outset of his biography, Lahr quotes Williams in the late 1930's vowing to write plays that "were a picture of my own heart". In Lahr's account, Williams later continued to aim "to be simple, direct, and terrible. I will speak truth as I see it.. without concealment or evasion and with a fearless unashamed frontal assault upon life." This volume and its companion allow the reader to measure whether and how well Williams succeeded in his aims.

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