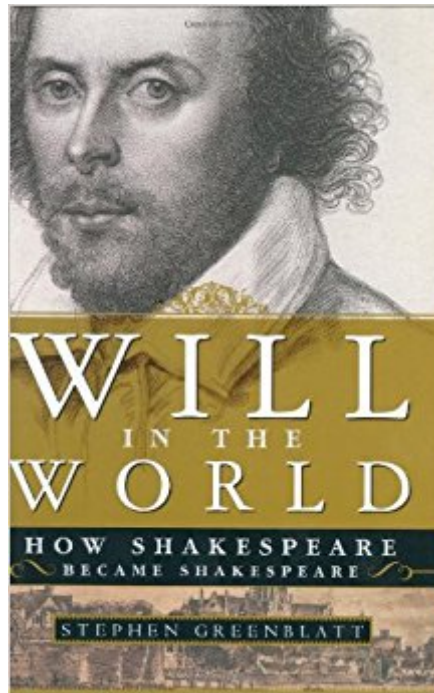




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Will In The World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare



Synopsis

"So engrossing, clearheaded, and lucid that its arrival is not just welcome but cause for celebration." — Dan Cryer, *Newsday* Stephen Greenblatt, the charismatic Harvard professor who "knows more about Shakespeare than Ben Jonson or the Dark Lady did" (John Leonard, *Harper's*), has written a biography that enables us to see, hear, and feel how an acutely sensitive and talented boy, surrounded by the rich tapestry of Elizabethan life; full of drama and pageantry, and also cruelty and danger; could have become the world's greatest playwright. A young man from the provinces — a man without wealth, connections, or university education — moves to London. In a remarkably short time he becomes the greatest playwright not just of his age but of all time. His works appeal to urban sophisticates and first-time theatergoers; he turns politics into poetry; he recklessly mingles vulgar clowning and philosophical subtlety. How is such an achievement to be explained? *Will in the World* interweaves a searching account of Elizabethan England with a vivid narrative of the playwright's life. We see Shakespeare learning his craft, starting a family, and forging a career for himself in the wildly competitive London theater world, while at the same time grappling with dangerous religious and political forces that took less-agile figures to the scaffold. Above all, we never lose sight of the great works — *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and more — that continue after four hundred years to delight and haunt audiences everywhere. The basic biographical facts of Shakespeare's life have been known for over a century, but now Stephen Greenblatt shows how this particular life history gave rise to the world's greatest writer. Bringing together little-known historical facts and little-noticed elements of Shakespeare's plays, Greenblatt makes inspired connections between the life and the works and deliver "a dazzling and subtle biography" (Richard Lacayo, *Time*). Readers will experience Shakespeare's vital plays again as if for the first time, but with greater understanding and appreciation of their extraordinary depth and humanity. **A Best Book of the Year: The New York Times 10 Best Books of 2004; Time magazine's #1 Best Nonfiction Book; A Washington Post Book World Rave ; An Economist Best Book ; A San Francisco Chronicle Best Book; A Christian Science Monitor Best Book; A Chicago Tribune Best Book; A Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Best Book ; NPR's Maureen Corrigan's Best.** 16 pages of color illustrations

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Customer Reviews

There's no shortage of good Shakespearean biographies. But Stephen Greenblatt, brilliant scholar and author of *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, reminds us that the "surviving traces" are "abundant but thin" as to known facts. He acknowledges the paradox of the many biographies spun out of conjecture but then produces a book so persuasive and breathtakingly enjoyable that one wonders what he could have done if the usual stuff of biographical inquiry--memoirs, interviews, manuscripts, and drafts--had been at his disposal. Greenblatt uses the "verbal traces" in Shakespeare's work to take us "back into the life he lived and into the world to which he was so open." Whenever possible, he also ushers us from the extraordinary life into the luminous work. The result is a marvelous blend of scholarship, insight, observation, and, yes, conjecture--but conjecture always based on the most convincing and inspired reasoning and evidence. Particularly compelling are Greenblatt's discussions of the playwright's relationship with the university wit Robert Greene (discussed as a chief source for the character of Falstaff) and of Hamlet in relation to the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet, his aging father, and the "world of damaged rituals" that England's Catholics were forced to endure. *Will in the World* is not just the life story of the world's most revered writer. It is the story, too, of 16th- and 17th-century England writ large, the story of religious upheaval and political intrigue, of country festivals and brutal public executions, of the court and the theater, of Stratford and London, of martyrdom and recusancy, of witchcraft and magic, of love and death: in short, of the private but engaged William Shakespeare in his remarkable world. Throughout the book, Greenblatt's style is breezy and familiar. He often refers to the poet simply as Will. Yet for all his alacrity of style and the book's accessibility, *Will in the World* is profoundly erudite, an enormous contribution to the world of Shakespearean letters.

--Silvana Tropea Interview with Stephen Greenblatt Stephen Greenblatt shares his thoughts about what make Shakespeare Shakespeare and why the Bard continues to fascinate us endlessly.

This much-awaited new biography of the elusive Bard is brilliant in conception, often superb in execution, but sometimes—perhaps inevitably—disappointing in its degree of speculativeness. Bardolators may take this last for granted, but curious lay readers seeking a fully cohesive and convincing life may at times feel the accumulation of "may haves," "might haves" and "could haves" make it difficult to suspend disbelief. Greenblatt's espousing, for instance, of the theory that Shakespeare's "lost" years before arriving in London were spent in Lancashire leads to suppositions that he might have met the Catholic subversive Edmund Campion, and how that might have affected him—and it all rests on one factoid: the bequeathing by a nobleman of some player's items to a William Shakeshafte, who may, plausibly, have been the young Shakespeare. Nevertheless, Norton Shakespeare general editor and New Historicist Greenblatt succeed impressively in locating the man in both his greatest works and the turbulent world in which he lived. With a blend of biography, literary interpretation and history, Greenblatt persuasively analyzes William's father's rise and fall as a public figure in Stratford, which pulled him in both Protestant and Catholic directions and made his eldest son "a master of double consciousness." In a virtuoso display of historical and literary criticism, Greenblatt contrasts Christopher Marlowe's Jew of Malta, Elizabeth's unfortunate Sephardic physician—who was executed for conspiracy—and Shakespeare's ambiguous villain Shylock. This wonderful study, built on a lifetime's scholarship and a profound ability to perceive the life within the texts, creates as vivid and full portrait of Shakespeare as we are likely ever to have. 16 pages color illus. not seen by PW. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Dr Greenblatt has achieved that very rare success for an author, and particularly for a successful academic, of producing a book that is not only highly informative on an interesting subject, but is also a pure pleasure to read. He is honest in not claiming an excess of knowledge of Shakespeare personally, since there is so very little, but instead presents excellent research into his times, his profession and other significant individuals about whom more is recorded. For one point, I had not realized exactly how much accuracy was contained in Sir Tom Stoppard's *Shakespeare in Love*, a fictional production if there ever was one. Similarly, the information and commentary on early Reformation England is unusually worthwhile in explaining just how the unique phenomenon of The Bard's work came about. It is very rare that a book including this much information and commentary

is so enjoyable to read. I can't recommend it too highly.

Thoroughly researched, this book is an exhaustive description of the cultural, historical, political, economic, and religious setting in which William Shakespeare must have grown up. It describes the Stratford-upon-Avon of Shakespeare's childhood and adolescence and it describes the London of Shakespeare. In likewise manner, Greenblatt presents a detailed account of the religious and political conflicts that were part of Queen Elizabeth's era. In each chapter, Greenblatt makes connections between Shakespeare's setting and his plays and poetic imagination. The author is very careful in using "may" and "probable." Although different in scope from Shapiro's *Contested Will*, which criticizes the use of biographical material to attempt to understand his works, Greenblatt is meticulous in pointing out specific texts that may have been influenced by a particular event or context. One good example is the connection between an old Latin play "The Two Menaechmuses", which was often used at local schools to teach Latin and one of Shakespeare's early comedies "The Comedy of Errors." Sometimes, I felt that he made some cognitive leaps that were more difficult to sustain. And yet, his biographical studies are not unstudied speculations, but smart scholarly inferences. Regardless of whether you may agree or not, the book is worth reading. Although you may not agree with all his conclusions, the book is wealthy in descriptions of the world in which Shakespeare lived. You can place it along *Contested Will* as a serious scholarly work that explains those gaps in the history of the English bard.

Very interesting observations given the sparse evidence of who was Shakespeare. Starting with his birth, village education and inferred Catholic influence and paranoia in Protestant England. I enjoyed the portrait painted of his life as a playwright and his contemporaries in London in the late 1500s. Also enjoyed speculation and analysis of Shakespeare's plays with impact of his life experience woven into them.

I really enjoyed this and felt like I learned a lot about the ways in which Shakespeare's unique time and place potentially shaped his attitudes and, ultimately, his work. While perhaps somewhat speculative when it comes to Shakespeare himself, the book does a wonderful job of colorfully illustrating Elizabethan culture in a very accessible and engaging way. And I was absolutely thrilled that the author spent copious amounts of energy trying to solve the mystery of Shakespeare's theological allegiances. Peering through the lines of Shakespearean drama in search of either Catholic or Protestant affinities is of particular interest to me, and I loved that the author indulged my

curiosity in that respect. (And, in case you are wondering, according to Greenblatt, Shakespeare was undoubtedly Catholic, if he adhered to any theological beliefs at all, which is what I always suspected! :) My only criticism is that I feel as though the title is misleading. "Will's World" might have been a better choice, because, while I feel that my understanding of Elizabethan culture has been strengthened, ol' Will himself still remains somewhat of a mystery!

I've been in love with Shakespeare and his works for four decades and read every major biography of him I could find. I've played in his plays and I've also had awful American teachers who forced us to drone through them sans understanding, sans hope. I've seen plays onstage that made my heart sing or crack, just like I've seen wooden productions that would scare anyone off him for life. So when this book first came out, within the first chapter I realized that Greenblatt has finally climbed the mountain - a biography, impeccably written, suffused with both love for and total understanding of the world from which Shakespeare came and the plays and poems he wrote, that makes Will a real human being, not a marble icon. Not even the legendary Samuel Schoenbaum could quite pull that off. Years later, I'm re-reading it for the fourth time and finding it even better and worth this review. Quite reasonably, Greenblatt deals with that silly theory that a middle-class working man could not "write Shakespeare" without ever addressing it - when you've finished this book, you'll know as much as humanly possible about the man Will Shakespeare and know he DID write his own plays. More importantly, you can class him, like Michelangelo, as a working man born to that ineffable quality we call genius which cannot, by its very nature, be satisfactorily explained. But Greenblatt comes as close as any writer will ever come, I think, to finding the living man inside the legend and making choices that make sense as to what Will did, where he went, who he knew, and perhaps - just perhaps - how he felt as he wrote the most beautiful plays in the world.

This is a good follow up to other writings. Each author adds more knowledge concerning this phenomenal writer, but if you are looking for a complete biography, and expect to read only one book, I would choose something else. It is a quick read and gives a general overall description of the times.

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