



Shakespeare: The Biography

By Peter Ackroyd

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A *TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT* BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR

Drawing on an exceptional combination of skills as literary biographer, novelist, and chronicler of London history, Peter Ackroyd surely re-creates the world that shaped Shakespeare--and brings the playwright himself into unusually vivid focus. With characteristic narrative panache, Ackroyd immerses us in sixteenth-century Stratford and the rural landscape--the industry, the animals, even the flowers--that would appear in Shakespeare's plays. He takes us through Shakespeare's London neighborhood and the fertile, competitive theater world where he worked as actor and writer. He shows us Shakespeare as a businessman, and as a constant reviser of his writing. In joining these intimate details with profound intuitions about the playwright and his work, Ackroyd has produced an altogether engaging masterpiece.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

[Signature]Reviewed by Ron RosenbaumAt their best, Shakespearean biographers are like great jazz musicians, able to take a few notes of an old standard and spin them into dizzying riffs of conjecture. At their worst they reshuffle old wives' tales, piling supposition upon conjecture into a rickety house of cards. Peter Ackroyd can riff with the best, and he brings to the task of making the old facts fresh some themes and variations of his own that deserve a hearing. He is particularly good, in fact, on the question of sound: the way the language Shakespeare wrote, his players spoke and his audiences heard differed from the Shakespeare we hear and read today. Demonstrating the courage of his convictions, he does something daring for a book aimed at a general reader: he renders all of his citations from Shakespeare "in the original." Thus a phrase from *Timon of Athens* is printed: "Our Poesie is as a Goume which ouses" (rather than "gum which oozes"), an effect that can defamiliarize, often in an illuminating way. An accomplished literary biographer, Ackroyd doesn't offer a new explanation of how the glover's son of provincial Stratford became the sophisticated poetic genius of London. Instead he gives us intelligent, often elegant, variations on the old ones. Like many of his fellow biographers he warns us that a particular "tradition" has no corroboration and then plays it out anyway. So with such recent, hotly debated questions as whether Shakespeare spent time in his youth in the household of subversive secret Catholics, Ackroyd spins it out for all it's worth. But the great strength of Ackroyd's book is the depth of his immersion in the culture of Shakespeare's age and the sense he gives of Shakespeare as a product of that extraordinary moment in time. His feeling for the role of the theater in Elizabethan London, "a city where dramatic spectacles became the primary means of understanding reality," seems to come from an impressively wide reading of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic contemporaries. His judgments about the work itself are sometimes ingenious, occasionally eccentric, as when he tells us, "All the evidence suggests, too, that the speech, 'To be or not to be' is an interpolation," an unnecessary addition to *Hamlet*, possibly "from another play altogether." While location of "To be or not to be" is different in an early quarto of *Hamlet*, to say "All the evidence suggests" interpolation is an overstatement. Still, immersion in Ackroyd's biography cumulatively gives one a feeling that one has lived for a brief time in Shakespeare's world. Ackroyd constructs an intricate mosaic of Elizabethan context, which brings us closer to the shadowy figure, whose most renowned character, Hamlet, tells us: "I have that within which passes show."

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—Describing himself as a Shakespeare enthusiast instead of an expert, Ackroyd focuses on the bard as an extraordinarily talented theater professional rather than rhapsodizing about the intricacies of the man's genius. He interweaves Shakespeare's life story with England's dramatic history and the fascinating world of the emerging Elizabethan theater. Apocryphal stories are identified and plausible explanations for what occurred during the missing years are offered. Shakespeare emerges as a thoroughly engaging, almost modern man, brimming with humor, eager for social advancement, and carefully tracking the popular trends in entertainment. Students who want to discover whether Shakespeare really was the author of the famous plays will find compelling evidence that only the man from Stratford could have hidden so many ingenious clues in his work. Sixteen pages of color illustrations include portraits of Shakespeare's famous contemporaries, photographs of the interiors of Elizabethan buildings, and illustrated title pages. Those daunted by the length of this book will find it a good reference source. Students looking for information on the building of the Globe, the meanings of the sonnets, the differences in the various editions and revisions of the plays, and other typical academic questions will find useful, well-organized information. A rich, vivid account.—Kathy Tewell, Fairfax County Public Library, VA

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Ackroyd both defies and corroborates Emerson's dictum that "Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare." For while he illuminates the Bard's life with a wealth of scholarship that Shakespeare himself could never have provided, Ackroyd wisely allows the Bard to tell much of his own story through revealing episodes in his own immortal work. When, for instance, we see a young schoolboy being badgered by a severe schoolmaster in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Ackroyd lets us know why this unfortunate young scholar bears the name William: his circumstances reflect Shakespeare's own during his years in the King's New School in Stratford-upon-Avon. Others (including Stephen Goldblatt in his *Will in the World*, 2004) have likewise mined Shakespeare's plays and poetry for telling clues about the playwright's life. But Ackroyd brings to his biographical reading the imaginative insights of a gifted poet and novelist, along with the passions of a scholar so absorbed in the Elizabethan world that he knows which Pembroke actor curled his lip when Shakespeare gave him a line dripping with wrath and which haughty dramatist matched wits with Shakespeare when he visited the Mermaid Tavern on Bread Street. Vivid and capacious, a life study worthy of its subject. *Bryce Christensen*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kenneth Kelly:

Do you have favorite book? If you have, what is your favorite's book? Book is very important thing for us to find out everything in the world. Each reserve has different aim or perhaps goal; it means that book has different type. Some people sense enjoy to spend their the perfect time to read a book. They are reading whatever they have because their hobby is usually reading a book. Why not the person who don't like studying a book? Sometime, particular person feel need book if they found difficult problem as well as exercise. Well, probably you'll have this Shakespeare: The Biography.

Arturo McDaniel:

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