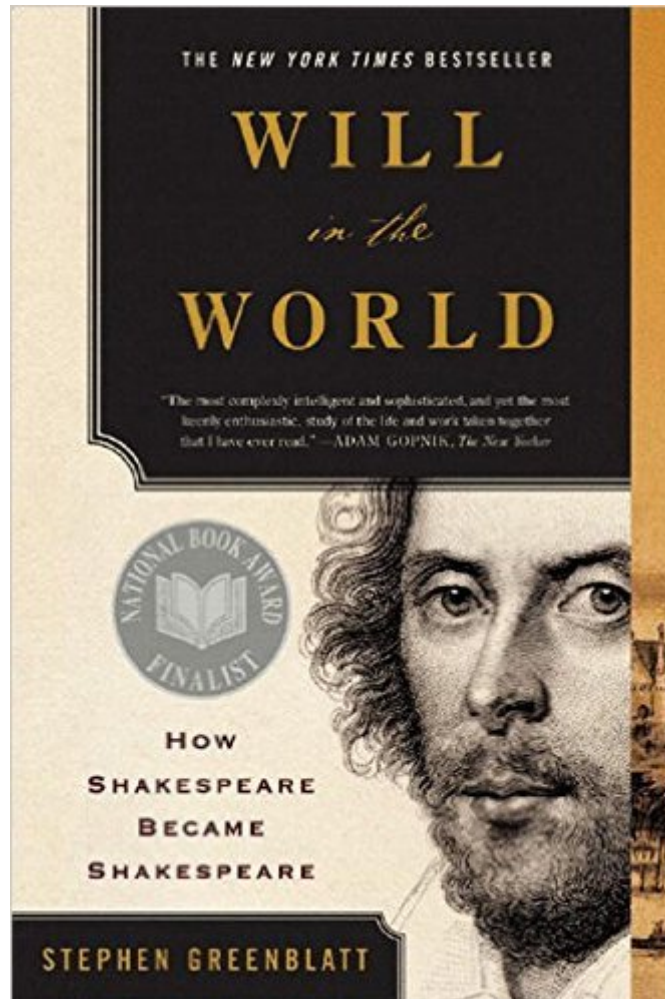


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Will In The World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare



Synopsis

"Greenblatt knows more about [Shakespeare] than Ben Jonson or the Dark Lady did." — John Leonard, *Harper's*

A young man from a small provincial town moves to London in the late 1580s and, in a remarkably short time, becomes the greatest playwright not of his age alone but of all time. How is an achievement of this magnitude to be explained? How did Shakespeare become Shakespeare? Stephen Greenblatt brings us down to earth to see, hear, and feel how an acutely sensitive and talented boy, surrounded by the rich tapestry of Elizabethan life, could have become the world's greatest playwright. A Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award Finalist. 16 pages of color illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* is a marvelous "biography" of sorts. Greenblatt's world relies as much on what is known about Shakespeare and the world that he lived in. Is it possible that a man without a university education and without serious political connections and wealth could have written the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare? Yes and to assume otherwise would be the same as assuming that Paris Hilton could become the greatest actress of our generation by virtue of the fact that she's wealthy and hangs out a crowd that includes talented artists. Just because you've got social advantages (or disadvantages) doesn't necessarily mean you'll change the world. Greenblatt indirectly creates a compelling argument for Shakespeare as the author of the plays under his name. Great art can appear out of anyone with the talent, desire and opportunity to present it.

Greenblatt's biography shows through his cross connections and supposition just how Shakespeare might have evolved into the great playwright that we, the audience, know and love. By looking at the world that shaped Shakespeare, Greenblatt proposes a world that shaped Shakespeare's writing and helped shape the theatrical world around him as well. Although Greenblatt bases a lot of his observations and conclusions on deduction and supposition, he makes a lot of intelligent and accurate observations about the world that shaped William Shakespeare. He also, in turn, speculates (sometimes hitting his target and sometimes not) how Shakespeare used the world that formed him to, in turn, form his great works. Are all the conclusions perfect and ironclad?

For any actor playing Shakespeare, the identity of who wrote the plays is really a moot point. You simply can't approach any of his roles with a headful of scholarship & dramaturgy. As for the Bard's true identity---some will say it's Marlowe, some furiously maintain it is the Earl of Oxford. Greenblatt seems content with the glove-maker's son theory. Which is fine by me. What makes this book a cut above any "biographies" is the fact that Greenblatt is more intent on raising questions than passing any of his well informed suppositions off as fact. And interesting questions they are. For instance, why is Shakespeare's wife virtually left out of his last will & testament? Bequeathing her only a "2nd best bed" after 30+ years of marriage & nothing else? What Greenblatt does here is take what little historical records we have, coupled with the politics of the age & tie them into Shakespeare's work. What emerges is an ever so faint pencil sketch of a shrewd, practically minded opportunist who despite his phenomenal success, sought to call as little attention to his personal affairs as possible. In other words, a deliberate cipher. Someone who took in the the sundry world around him & put it all on display in the conveniently ironic guise of Fiction. But someone who seems to have consciously left little or no record of himself beyond his work. So what little we know may actually reveal more than we think. Greenblatt reminds us what a dangerous time Shakespeare was living in. One had to be extremely cautious lest the celebrity of one's words wind up on the end of a pike on London Bridge. Throughout it all, Greenblatt wisely never leaves the realm of speculation but does a masterful job of aligning current events alongside Shakespeare's words.

I very much enjoyed Stephen Greenblatt's previous work on Shakespeare, *Hamlet in Purgatory*; therefore, I was very excited to see Mr. Greenblatt had decided to write a complete biography of Shakespeare. Fortunately, Mr. Greenblatt did not disappoint. *Will in the World* is one of the best Shakespeare biographies I have read. The problem for any biographer of Shakespeare is, of course, the minimal records left behind. Apart from some information left in church and financial records,

there is almost nothing of certainty known about Shakespeare. A Shakespearean biographer, then, is forced to make a certain number of guesses and speculations if he is going to come up with any kind of complete story for a reader. Historically, these speculations have ranged from the mundane to the outrageous but they always must rely on the reader's trust of the author's scholarship and how it relates to our own understanding of Shakespeare. I find Mr. Greenblatt to be a very believable biographer. The main reason I find Mr. Greenblatt's work to be so compelling is the correlations he finds between well-recorded historical events, what is known of Shakespeare and, ultimately, how this finds its way into Shakespeare's work. For example, in the first chapter Greenblatt describes a visit Queen Elizabeth made to Kenilworth where Leicester puts on a grand display for her. Now, was Shakespeare present at these festivities, perhaps even as a young country player? There is no way to know for sure but Greenblatt quotes Robert Langham's letter describing the event and takes us to lines from *Midsummer Nights Dream*. Shakespeare's recreation of the event is striking. Perhaps he was there. The other reason I like Greenblatt's work on Shakespeare is that he makes him human.

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