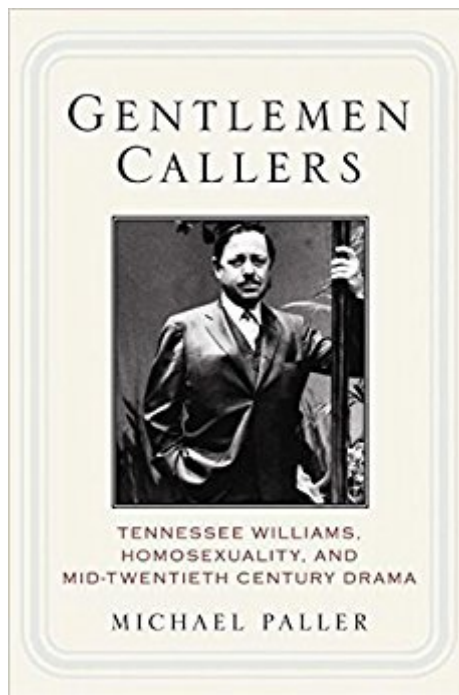




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Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, And Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama



Synopsis

Gentlemen Callers provides a fascinating look at America's greatest Twentieth-century playwright and perhaps the most-performed, even today. Michael Paller looks at Tennessee Williams's plays from the 1940s through the 1960s against the backdrop of the playwright's life story, providing fresh details. Through this lens Paller examines the evolution of Mid-Twentieth-century America's acknowledgment and acceptance of homosexuality. From the early *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and one-act *Auto-da-Fé*, through *The Two-Character Play* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, Paller's book investigates how Williams's earliest critics marginalized or ignored his gay characters and why, beginning in the 1970s, many gay liberationists reviled them. Lively, blunt, and provocative, this book will appeal to anyone who loves Williams, Broadway, and the theater.

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Customer Reviews

'Like a great actor inhabiting one of Tennessee Williams' characters, Michael Paller brings intelligence, nuance and considerable artistry to the complex figure of the man himself. He shatters the mythology surrounding Williams - that he was an innately tragic, self-loathing homosexual - and bravely recontextualizes him not only as an incomparable artist, but as a ground-breaking social pioneer. His book is a welcome re-evaluation of one of our most revered and misunderstood American originals.' - Doug Wright, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *I Am My Own Wife* 'Tennessee Williams was America's most original dramatic talent. He was also gay. The significance of this fact is explored by Michael Paller in a book full of striking insights into the man, the plays, and the

theatre of which he was a part. What emerges from this study is a familiar figure seen in a new complexity. What also emerges is an America whose oppressive laws and casual cruelties toward those who shared his sexuality in part created the pressures that created the context, if not always the subject, of his art.' - Christopher Bigsby, Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and Director of the Arthur Miller Centre 'Gentlemen Callers and Michael Paller look at the writing of Tennessee Williams through a gay perspective that is insightful and blessedly free from many of the distortions and exaggerations that previous studies have indulged in. It will be of interest to theatre goers and practitioners alike.' - Michael Kahn, Artistic Director, The Shakespeare Theatre 'Michael Paller's Gentleman Callers offers an innovative, perceptive, and very readable examination of the works Tennessee Williams produced in his long and productive career...Paller reveals the extent to which misguided 'political correctness' among some recent critics has prevented a judicious reading of the works. This sensitive and informed analysis is destined to become a major addition to Williams scholarship, offering insights to both long-time Williams fans and scholars and to those unfamiliar with his work.' - Kenneth Holditch, author of Tennessee Williams and the South and founding editor of The Tennessee Williams Journal '...an insightful debunking of the conventional wisdom characterizing the theatre icon as a tragic figure, a self-hating homosexual inherently incapable of true happiness. Instead, in Paller's thoughtful and convincing re-evaluation of both the playwright and his plays, William's emerges a ground-breaking figure on both personal and professional grounds, an ironically happy ending for an envelope-pusher who freed the stage from that very same convention.' - ELLE Magazine

Gentlemen Callers provides a fascinating look at America's greatest twentieth-century playwright and perhaps the most-performed, even today. Michael Paller looks at Tennessee Williams's plays from the 1940s through the 1960s against the backdrop of the playwright's life story, providing fresh details. Through this lens Paller examines the evolution of mid-twentieth-century America's acknowledgment and acceptance of homosexuality. From the early one-act *Auto-da-Fé* and *The Glass Menagerie* through *Camino Real*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Garden District* and the late *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, Paller's book investigates how Williams's earliest critics marginalized or ignored his gay characters and why, beginning in the 1970s, many gay liberationists reviled them. Lively, blunt, and provocative, this book will appeal to anyone who loves Williams, Broadway, and the theater. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

I had read Lyle Leverich's *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* several years ago and consider

it the definitive biography of the playwrights (or at least of his early years), so I figured I'd be fairly well acquainted with all the information in Paller's *Gentlemen Callers*. But I quickly discovered Paller could still surprise me. *Gentlemen Callers* is a hybrid of a book - part biography, part social history. If you're looking for biographical info on Williams, stick to his biographies; but if you want to understand how he went from the writer of the lyrical "Glass Menagerie" and the ground-breakingly frank "Streetcar Named Desire" to the "failed" playwright of his later years, this is the book you want to read. Growing up in the '70s, I remember Williams having a reputation as a washed up writer with a drug and alcohol problem. He was also one of the only "out" celebrities I was aware of. Williams spanned the time from when homosexuality still was mostly "the love that dare not speak its name" to the post-Stonewall years of gay liberation. Paller's book shows how Williams' own gay identity played a role in his plays (even when homosexuality was only a subtext rather than an open theme). I'm grateful that Paller produced this book. It has helped me understand how Tennessee Williams went from being ahead of his times in the '40s and '50s to being behind the times during the turbulent '60s and '70s. Truly a fascinating read!

Outside of the movie version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or reading the script for *Glass Menagerie* in high school, I've never had any connection to Tennessee Williams. Sadly, I have never seen one of his plays on stage either except for a horrible version of *Camino Real* that I don't count. But I still have always been intrigued by him both as a playwright and as a homosexual. A recent trip to his grave, right here in my hometown of St. Louis, got me wanting to learn more about him. So, I picked up this book in a local used bookstore and read it in about a week. It's pretty dry reading, and lost my attention at times since I wasn't acquainted with most of Williams' work. At times, Paller goes on and on about the latent and hidden homosexual characters or themes of various plays of Williams, but he balances this with an almost microscopic look into where Williams was in his life while he was writing the play. We see how Williams took the events in his own life and turned it into art. It inspired me to want to know more. Paller also gives the reader a glimpse into how society was treating homosexuals at the time as well - from science and medicine, to psychology and even the military. We get a very detailed look into what life was like for Williams as a homosexual through the 50s and 60s. Part biography, part history, and part theatre review, the book offers up a nice detailed account of the man Williams was and the work he created.

This book is kind of a mixture. Partly it's a biographical sketch of Tennessee Williams, partly it's a review of the struggles gay and lesbian people had during the 1940's and '50's, partly it's an

analysis of the homosexuality in Williams plays, partly it's an analysis of the critics writing about his plays. And all of that is a lot to put in one rather small book. Strangely enough, even with all that in the book, Mr. Paller pulls it off quite well. He is able to describe the gay-bashing of the time, and the tremendous internal struggles that this created in Williams. His descriptions of the critics analysis of the plays tells us a lot about the critics themselves, more about them than the plays. It's too much to say that this is a book that you can't put down. Instead I found it's a book that you read for a while, and then you want to think about what you've read before you go on. Tennessee Williams is probably America's foremost playwright. Some like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and more are still among the best plays ever done. The anguish in the writer in facing first his own discovery of his homosexuality and then finding it in the oppressive eyes of the time make for quite a story.

Gentlemen Callers is a penetrating look at the work of Tennessee Williams in the context of his homosexuality and the pervasive homophobia in the midst of which he grew up and created some of the most moving and significant works of drama in the English language. *Gentlemen Callers* describes in all its chilling reality the emergence of intense homophobia in the mid-20th century, intentionally fostered by government agencies, and discusses how this homophobia impacted his life and his work. Author Paller makes a particular effort to point out the wrongmindedness of latter day gay liberationist critics who pilloried Williams for supposedly creating characters from an internalized homophobia, criticism which failed to appreciate the process of artistic creation and the characters themselves in their dramatic settings. Paller analyzes a number of the most developmentally significant of Williams' plays in the light of the homosexuality that was such an important motif in his oeuvre. *Gentlemen Callers* is an engaging study, and the most substantial examination of this writer in the context of the homosexuality that so significantly informed his work.

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