DID THIS WRITER ACTUALLY KNOW TENNESSEE WILLIAMS?

James Grissom says that he met the playwright and his famous muses, and quoted them extensively in his work. Not everyone believes him.

By Helen Shaw

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Grissom says that the playwright gave him a life-changing mission. Illustration by Valentin Tkach

. . . Ometime in September, 1982, James Grissom, a twenty-year-old English student at Louisiana State University, receives a life-changing phone call from Tennessee Williams. It doesn't come completely out of the blue: Grissom had sent a fan letter to the playwright, enclosing a picture and a few short stories, and asking for advice. But the response, Grissom would write decades later, surpasses his wildest hopes. When he picks up the receiver, a rough voice drawls down the line, "Perhaps you can be of some help to me."

On the phone, the famously dissipated playwright tells Grissom that he is having a creative crisis. He has always begun his plays by imagining a woman walking across a stage, "announced by the arrival of a fog," but he hasn't seen this fog in years: the calcifying effects of time and "monumental accretions of toxins self-administered" have left him unable to write at his "previous level of power."

Grissom drives from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, and, at the Court of Two Sisters Restaurant, Williams dictates to him a list of writers, directors, and (mostly) actresses. Grissom jots the names down on a menu. Williams wants Grissom to convey his thoughts to these muses—specific praise, a memory—and then find out what Williams has meant to them. "I would like for you to ask these people if I ever mattered," the playwright says.

So begins "Follies of God: Tennessee Williams and the Women of the Fog," a book by James Grissom, which was published by Knopf in 2015. (Knopf is the publisher of several *New Yorker* collections and writers.) Grissom's haunted, nonlinear, detail-rich book intertwines interviews with the

playwright (who is by turns garrulous, melancholy, transported, resolute) and Grissom's subsequent wide-ranging conversations with those who influenced him. In "Follies," Grissom writes that, in the course of five days that September, the two men—one a seventy-one-year-old giant of American letters, the other a lanky college student scribbling notes in a blue exam booklet—pinballed around New Orleans while Williams talked about his favorite performers, his faith, his lovers, his great plays, and his determination to return to work. In the St. Louis Cathedral, the white wedding cake that towers above Jackson Square, Williams bought Grissom a rosary, naming each bead for an inspiration: Maureen Stapleton, Lillian Gish, Stella Adler . . . the catalogue went on.

Grissom recounts that weeks before Williams died, in February, 1983, the playwright called his house and left a message: "Be my witness." It took Grissom six years, but once he moved to New York he began reaching out to the names on his list, bearing Williams's words as his calling card. It's astounding the interviews Grissom managed to get—the book includes a constellation of twentieth-century luminaries, among them Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and Marlon Brando. There are also less widely known figures, like the elegant trouper Marian Seldes, who won a Tony Award for lifetime achievement in 2010, and two women who performed in revivals of "The Glass Menagerie": Jo Van Fleet and Lois Smith, who won a Tony in 2021, at the age of ninety, for her role in "The Inheritance." Grissom chronicles a remarkable intimacy with his subjects. He describes sitting with Stapleton as she drinks Blue Nun sweet wine; talking with Hepburn over bowls of ice cream; and lying in bed next to Kim Hunter, the original Stella from "A Streetcar Named Desire," so they can listen through the wall to a play at the theatre next door.

Victoria Wilson, a legendary Knopf editor whose writers have included Anne Rice and the biographer Meryle Secrest, acquired the book and worked on it with Grissom for almost ten years. In the intervening decade, Grissom started releasing some of his material online, which brought him

into various Williams orbits—he spoke at the 2009 Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival, as part of its "I Remember Tennessee" panel. Over the years, Grissom launched Twitter and Instagram accounts, a "Follies of God" Facebook page (which now has more than a hundred and ninety-four thousand followers), a Substack newsletter (which currently lists more than seven hundred posts), and several blogs, including one dedicated to "Follies of God." On these platforms, he began publishing quotations from Williams and his muses, as well as reflections shared with him in the nineties by Alec Guinness, Arthur Miller, Mike Nichols, Eartha Kitt, and others. (One blog, mainly pictures, is called "Faking the Fog.")

In 2015, Grissom went on a book tour, and Wilson interviewed him at a Barnes & Noble on the Upper West Side. "From the moment I got this manuscript," Wilson said, "I knew this book had greatness." In a video of the event, Grissom—then fifty-three, his fine, graying hair combed back, the "Follies" rosary around his neck—is an easy and gracious raconteur, chatting about how he and Williams used to do impressions together of the comic actor Charles Nelson Reilly. Wilson herself is steeped in American performance history: she edited the letters of Williams and his longtime friend Maria St. Just, and wrote a biography of Barbara Stanwyck. Wilson told the crowd, "This is without question, as far as I'm concerned, the best book on Tennessee Williams ever written."

The book is more than four hundred pages, but there clearly wasn't room for everything Grissom had gathered. In his acknowledgments, he thanks a hundred and thirteen people who were "generous with their time and their memories." Only seven of these are cited in the book, and, oddly, many of the starriest on the list (Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman) are quoted solely on his blogs. Grissom writes that he received a series of phone calls from Brando in the early nineties, but most of that material—in which the actor held forth on everything from manliness to Christian Science—was reserved for the Web, too.

The scale of Grissom's interviews, between the online material and the book, is staggering, as is the number of people Williams seemingly counted as north stars. Grissom quotes him praising, at length, more than a hundred separate artists, ranging from Barbra Streisand to Federico Fellini. The playwright's observations weren't all from five days of conversation; Grissom says they had a few phone calls and that Williams also gave him written tributes to transcribe. Still, the range is surprising: the playwright says he noticed Annette O'Toole in the schlock remake of "Cat People" and describes Holland Taylor as "crafted of bisque" after seeing her, Grissom posits, in an episode of "Bosom Buddies."

"Follies" wasn't reviewed by any major outlets, but smaller papers raved. The Tampa Bay *Times* called it "the real deep dish," and the *Connecticut Post* declared it "some of the best writing on theater and actresses you will ever encounter." The memoir was blurbed by the publishing heavyweight Michael Korda, who said it was "electrifying," and by the playwright John Guare, who described it as an "original, hypnotic . . . bound-to-be-controversial document." Guare is mentioned in the book and knew Williams—they had made an Atlantic crossing on the QE 2 in adjacent cabins.

After the book's publication, Grissom's work circulated widely. A *Times Style Magazine* piece on James Baldwin used a Brando quote from a Grissom interview. Mark Harris included quotes from a Grissom post in his 2021 biography of Mike Nichols. And a Williams phrase from a Grissom interview shared on Facebook—"We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love"—even appeared on the chaplaincy Web site at the University of Edinburgh, as one of its daily prayers and reflections. (None of these quotes had appeared in "Follies.")

A few commenters on Goodreads and Amazon, though, observed that Grissom's book didn't include sources or notes. Grissom explains in "Follies" that he almost never taped his interviews, and that his "ultimately more than twenty" blue books have "long since deteriorated," their contents transferred

over the decades onto word processors and computers. Others pointed out that Grissom hadn't provided concrete dates for his interviews. The idea that his notebooks had "deteriorated" also struck some readers as odd. "As if he had taken notes in 1882, not 1982," one skeptic wrote.

In 2015, most of the people Grissom had quoted in the book were dead, so it was hard to double-check that his encounters had taken place. His online quotes from artistic figures sometimes appeared uncannily timed, published just after their deaths. People in the theatre world noticed. The director Mark Armstrong told me that he and his friends message one another when anyone famous dies: "We'll say, 'Oh, looking forward to James Grissom's interview with, you know, Angela Lansbury coming next week.' " Grissom hasn't posted anything about Lansbury, but when Nichols died, in November, 2014, he posted an excerpt from an interview with him for the first time four days later.

On January 9, 2017, on Facebook, Augustin Correro, the co-founder of the Tennessee Williams Theatre Company of New Orleans, called Grissom's "Follies" blog "post-truth." Correro soon saw an unusual set of excoriating online reviews on his theatre company's Facebook page, made by profiles that seemed strangely two-dimensional—some of which he successfully challenged as fake and had taken down. He posted at length about the experience, specifically blaming Grissom and calling his material "unverifiable." Correro's comments were reposted by Randall Rapstine, who was then a graduate student at Texas Tech University.

Grissom escalated the situation by sending an e-mail that March to Rapstine's adviser at T.T.U., Mark Charney. "It has also been brought to my attention that you . . . have stated that the book is false," he wrote, adding that Knopf's lawyers were beginning legal proceedings against Charney, Correro, and Rapstine. In the same e-mail, Grissom said that he had "worked more than two decades on the book, and all relevant materials proving this were given to my publishers"; he also claimed that his notebooks

were being sent to the Harry Ransom Center, at the University of Texas at Austin. (Eric Colleary, a curator of performing arts at the Ransom Center, has no record of Grissom ever contacting the archive. Knopf declined to comment on Grissom's claim regarding legal action; Rapstine said that no case ensued.)

Then, on June 16, 2020, Grissom posted a piece called "We Will Die of Stupidity," subtitled "Interview with Harold Pinter, conducted by James Grissom, via telephone, 1991." In it, the playwright observes to Grissom, "You and I can find each other within a day via an e-mail," which raised eyebrows—very few people had e-mail in 1991. (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he "did not talk to Pinter until 1997 and 1998. This could be a typo on my part or a misunderstanding.")

Last October, Kara Manning, an employee of the public-radio station WFUV, questioned a Pinter quote from Grissom. "This doesn't sound like Pinter at all," Manning wrote on Facebook. "Curious. Are there any tapes of these interviews?" Grissom responded, "Yes, there are tapes. And notes." But, rather than producing them, within four days he published a Substack essay in which he called Manning a "Disturbed Online Stalker," and included a picture of her and the name of her workplace. On Facebook, he wrote, "She danced with slander, and she may now dance with unemployment." Manning was so concerned that she contacted Kathryn Zuckerman, the Knopf publicist who had worked on "Follies," asking her to intervene. Grissom then sent Manning an e-mail that included the line, in all caps, "I AM GOING TO SUE YOU."

On April 3rd, I e-mailed Grissom, telling him that I was writing about his work and the questions surrounding "Follies of God." He phoned me that night at around ten o'clock. We spoke—with a break for him to call me from a landline when his cell died—until 2 A.M.

Grissom is an engaging, if digressive, anecdotalist. Referring to Gus Weill, a

playwright turned advertising agent he said he worked for in Louisiana, he noted that Weill's 1978 play, "The November People," had closed after one performance on Broadway and that "the New York *Times* review suggested that the Billy Rose Theatre be fumigated." (His memory is sharp: the actual review said it "may need an airing.") During the first two hours, he framed parts of our conversation as a kind of bantering quiz. Hadn't I heard of Weill? But someone had told him I was a scholar! He pivoted throughout our interview, sometimes laughing at his own colorful biography, sometimes complaining wearily about how he has been treated by those who have doubted him. "It speaks, I think, to something far bigger than either of us," he said. "It is so easy to hate and to malign someone you don't know."

Grissom calls "Follies" a memoir, but it contains few details about his life. James Grissom, Jr., was born in October, 1961, in Baton Rouge, the youngest of four children. His father, James, Sr., was an electrician who worked for a chemical-manufacturing company; his mother, Winnie, worked at the Baton Rouge Clinic. Jimmy, as he was then called, attended Baton Rouge High School, where he was a fixture in the drama department. On a 1978 class trip to New York, Grissom says, he saw Marian Seldes in "Deathtrap" and went backstage to have her sign a copy of her autobiography. This encounter, he told me, led to their long friendship. (They exchanged so many letters, he has said, that when they met again in 1989 she dumped them out on a table and told him, "This is a book.") In Grissom's senior yearbook, he's featured as the class clown: "His personality is so Steve Martinish it is impossible to ever anticipate his next move." In the accompanying picture, he's wearing striped suspenders. (It was 1979.)

Grissom was raised Southern Baptist, but, he said, he was abused in the Church, which drove him away. He said he felt that his family, which was otherwise loving and supportive, blamed him for the abuse: "They didn't know how to deal with a gay kid." After high school, he told me, he contributed arts reviews to local papers and, in 1980, he appeared on a local TV morning program. There he met Pat White, a Baton Rouge native who

had become a television actor in New York. “When my mother saw Pat White on the set, she went, ‘Jim is going to come home being friends with her,’ because she moved to New York and she had this glamorous life,” Grissom said. “Of course, we became friends.”

Two years after his fateful trip to New Orleans, he dropped out of his L.S.U. English program. He was living at home in Baton Rouge, working a series of jobs and drafting short stories, when White told him about a seventy-nine-year-old artist living in Manhattan who needed a roommate. He moved there in 1989.

In New York, he socialized with Seldes, and with other older New York actresses, including Jo Van Fleet and Lois Smith. These women created a network—and a soft place to land. Soon, a Louisiana acquaintance, who was renting a room in an apartment on the Upper West Side from a woman named Rose Byrnes, invited him to move in. He’s still there. “They’re gonna have to take me out in a box,” he told me, “because it’s rent-stabilized and it’s *eight rooms*. And the woman who had the lease I married.” In 2014, James S. Grissom (then fifty-two) married his roommate Rose M. Byrnes (then seventy-six). She died in July of 2019.

His work pursuits in the nineties and two-thousands were, as he described them, picaresque. There were media gigs (copy-editing at *Penthouse*, selling classifieds for the *Times*); sales positions in upmarket food stores (Dean & Deluca, Ecce Panis); jobs in restaurants (Acme, Artisanal). Grissom also clerked in museums (the Met and MOMA), worked at front desks (the Princeton Club, the Carlyle Hotel), and even had a stint as a receptionist and a script reader for the producer Daryl Roth.

Grissom was an employee at the Carlyle from March, 1998, to December 16, 1999. (He’s exact about that date.) He suggested that I talk to his friend the director Joe Calarco, who also worked at the hotel’s front desk in 1998. Calarco recalled the two of them standing around in their tuxedos, bonding

over theatre; he remembered, too, hearing about Tennessee Williams. "That was the big one for me," Calarco said. According to Grissom's blog, he interviewed Elizabeth Taylor at the Carlyle in 1991. I asked Calarco if he had ever heard that Grissom spoke with Taylor in the very place where they worked. "Oh, no," he said.

Grissom managed an Amy's Bread location from 2002 to 2004; Amy Scherber, the bakery's founder, still has great affection for him. Every day, he would have "hilarious stories about the staff and customers," she told me. ("I think it was the Southern upbringing," Grissom said. "I can talk to anybody.") Scherber recalled that when he left he was going to do "freelance writing for some TV show." Grissom's IMDb page lists several credits, but he told me that a lot of the information is wrong, and that his work was mainly in punching up other writers' scripts. "I did a lot—'Law & Order: Trial by Jury.' I can't remember how I got that job," he said. "I think someone just said, 'Oh, he's fast—and he can imitate anybody.' "

In the days following our call, I noticed that certain biographical details have proved malleable. In 2005, a short story of Grissom's—what he calls his only published piece of fiction—appeared in the collection "Fresh Men 2: New Voices in Gay Fiction." In that book, his biography notes that he "studied at Louisiana State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Brown University"; his "Follies" bio states that he attended L.S.U. and Penn. (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he attended L.S.U. and went to conferences at the Ivy League schools.)

His account of the late Marian Seldes's role in his life has shifted a bit, too: in "Follies of God," there is just their friendship; promoting his book in a "Theater Talk" television interview, Grissom said that she was the one who encouraged him to write to his idol in the eighties; and at an event at Books & Books in Coral Gables, Florida, he said that she vouched for him on the phone with Williams after their first contact. In Florida, he referred to her as his teacher at Juilliard, though that story has changed as well. He told *The*

New Yorker that he auditioned for Juilliard, got in, but never attended. He and Seldes did know each other; there is a picture of them together in 1997, and many people I spoke with talked about how much they adored each other. Her daughter, Katharine Andres, described the relationship between Seldes and Grissom as "symbiotic." Andres did not, however, know how far back it stretched.

What we know about Tennessee Williams in the last year of his life is simultaneously a great deal and not enough. In addition to his other, more well-known addictions (alcohol, prescription barbiturates), he never stopped working, and scholars are still digging through drafts and fragments in the four main archives—at Harvard, Columbia, the Ransom Center, and the Historic New Orleans Collection. The writer Ellen F. Brown, who is working on a cradle-to-grave biography of him, has catalogued more than fifteen hundred unpublished letters.

Grissom describes Williams as being creatively blocked at the time they supposedly met, but, in 1982, the playwright had at least three pieces in some stage of production, and there are drafts of seven full-length plays which date from his final year. The record does have inconsistencies. Some people I spoke to referred to Williams's own tendency to tell yarns. ("This is a man who feigned heart attacks in the middle of a show just to leave," John Lahr, the longtime *New Yorker* staff writer and the author of the 2014 biography "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh," told me.) Williams also allowed acquaintances to stay in his many homes, and, according to a letter he sent to Maria St. Just, he suspected that one of them might be stealing manuscripts. The appetite for material to fill in the gaps is bottomless. Yet "Follies of God" was mostly ignored in Williams circles; by the time it came out, Grissom had largely stopped being invited to speak at the festivals. Guare remembers being surprised that the book didn't have a bigger impact. "I was fascinated that the Williams aficionados . . . were not overwhelmed," he said.

I wanted to meet these Williams aficionados, so I went to New Orleans this spring to attend the Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference. The community is small. At a panel on Williams and "The Sense of Place," David Kaplan, the co-founder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival, looked down the table and said, "If the roof falls in, we lose a good deal of Williams scholarship." The playwright's vulnerability, especially at the end of his life, and his courtly attention to characters at the social margin endear him to his acolytes and readers in a way that goes beyond his work: several speakers imitated his rasping drawl when they quoted him.

Thomas Keith, a consulting editor at Williams's publisher, New Directions, has edited more than twenty Williams titles. I asked him what he might expect to see in a series of interviews conducted with Williams in September, 1982. "Anything about his new plays . . . his sister Rose and his care for her, the friends he kept in touch with, his many health issues, revisions to his will and legal matters, and the day-to-day affairs of life," Keith said. "He was always polite about interest in his early successes, but his focus was primarily on his new work." But, when Williams speaks to Grissom, he is preoccupied by the dramas that had secured his legacy decades before, like "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." On Meryl Streep: "She will age into the most extraordinary Blanche." On Annette O'Toole: "She could grow into a Maggie."

Some specialists told me that "Follies of God" wasn't of interest to them because, without transparent sourcing, they couldn't rely on it for their own work. But there are several Williams memoirs—including that of his mother, Edwina, "Remember Me to Tom," and his friend Dotson Rader's "Tennessee Williams: Cry of the Heart"—that have been carefully read as subjective accounts. John S. Bak, a professor at the Université de Lorraine and a specialist in Williams's last twenty years, said of "Follies," "Everyone, probably, within the tight-knit community recognizes the book as—oh, I don't want to say 'fluff,' but as undocumented, and therefore perhaps

unreliable." Some seemed leery of speaking on the record with me about Grissom, and, when I asked Bak why, he said that Grissom has a reputation as "rather a voracious individual who has connections apparently high up and uses those connections to create lawsuits and legal issues." Bak, at least, was willing to go on the record. "He was never ever that coherent, philosophical, poetic or winded in any interview I heard him deliver," he wrote me later, referring to Williams. And, he added, "he called his mother 'mother' and not 'mama.' "

Lahr also objected to the book's language. His Williams biography came out only six months before "Follies of God." (It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for biography, and was a finalist for the National Book Award. It also includes more than a hundred pages of notes.) Lahr observed that the women-from-the-fog creative process, which is so central to Grissom's narrative—in "Follies," "fog" is mentioned more than forty times—is sui generis. "There are books about his conversations. There are two volumes of published letters. There is a diary. There was not one mention of this. None," Lahr said. (I could find only one reference to fog and inspiration in his essays, letters, notebooks, and memoirs: a 1936 journal entry—"Maybe if I look hard enough into this fog I'll begin to see God's face.")

Then, there are the discrepancies that tear at the book's underlying fabric. For instance, Grissom repeatedly mentions Williams doing cocaine—"the porcelain countertop in the bathroom appeared to have been utilized by a manic baker"—but Rader told me that Williams didn't use cocaine. And Grissom sometimes seems to be revising theatre history itself. Williams's elegiac "Summer and Smoke" was largely panned when it opened on Broadway, in 1948. Then, in April, 1952, in an Off Broadway revival, the director José Quintero and the actress Geraldine Page turned the flop into a sensation. Grissom offers pages of overlapping interviews with Williams, Quintero, and Page to create a portrait of their collaboration on the production. But Ellen F. Brown, the biographer, notes that this "directly contradicts what the key players said." According to Quintero's 1974

autobiography, he didn't meet Williams until the writer came to see the show. In a 1959 interview, housed at the Oral History Archives at Columbia, Page is asked if Williams was "in evidence at all" during "Smoke." "Not till we'd been playing I guess a month or two," she says.

Biographers outside the Williams circuit have also had doubts. William J. Mann, who wrote "Kate: The Woman Who Was Hepburn" (a 2006 *Times* Notable Book of the Year) and "The Contender: The Story of Marlon Brando," told me that Grissom's accounts of his conversations with Hepburn in "Follies" "just didn't ring true." (Grissom wrote, for example, that Hepburn cried.) Mann showed the Brando quotes to Avra Douglas, Brando's onetime assistant and now a trustee of his estate, who replied, "I've never heard Marlon mention him, nor have I seen any evidence of their connection in the archive." (Grissom's next book, another memoir, has the working title "The Lake of the Mind: Brando in the Night.")

Some people I spoke with assumed that Knopf had fact-checked "Follies." But a lot of nonfiction books come to market without being fact-checked: the legal burden for accuracy generally rests on the author, not on the publisher. Some writers choose to pay out of pocket for a fact checker, which can cost between five thousand and twenty thousand dollars. (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he did not hire an outside fact checker.) Most books are vetted in-house by lawyers, but, as Mann explained to me, "basically, what they're looking for is 'Am I saying anything that might be libellous about someone who's still alive?' " A standard publishing practice, the so-called "legal read," scans for elements that might be accusatory, defamatory, libellous, or negative. "Positive lies could easily slip through," Mann said.

Academic journals rely instead on peer review. *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* is currently edited by Richard Barton Palmer, and it has published only one Grissom quote, in a 2017 article about Anna Magnani, by the scholar Tiffany Gilbert. Palmer said that there was some debate about its inclusion and that the choice not to remove it "was, between us, a mistake."

(Gilbert said she was never told that the quote had been questioned and would have happily excised it.) An editorial-board member told me that those who argued to keep it pointed out that "Follies" was published by a reputable press. Who, then, is the gatekeeper of truth? "The gate is shaky," Palmer said, with a laugh.

In our conversation, Grissom seemed aware of his reputation. He mentioned a *New Yorker* piece about Dan Mallory, the author who made up his own backstory—"I just think that's what the piece is, that I'm this fabulist." He complained that, while he had plenty of supporting material, I was eight years late in asking to see it. "I'm done with it," Grissom said. "I don't know why this keeps coming up." He doesn't seem to be altogether done, though. In April, he wrote an article for the online weekly Air Mail about Nancy Schoenberger's new book, "Blanche: The Life and Times of Tennessee Williams's Greatest Creation." Grissom spends much of his essay quoting from previously unpublished conversations he'd had with Williams.

Grissom told me that believing "Follies of God" comes down to a question of his word. "For a long time, the charge was 'Why are there no source notes?' Well, because I'm the source," Grissom said. "It's a memoir. It's not a biography."

Grissom has been the source of other stories as well. In 2016, he wrote a Facebook post saying that he had been diagnosed as having bladder cancer, in 2007, and, uninsured and desperate, he had turned to then Senator Hillary Clinton's office for help. He reported that Clinton told him, personally, "You need to fight this cancer and get well: You don't have time for this nonsense." The post was picked up by *People*, Out.com, and *Time*. *Cosmopolitan* ran an article titled "This Man's Story About Hillary Clinton Is Going Viral Because It's Honestly the *Best,*" which was updated with a Facebook comment from Clinton, thanking him for sharing his experiences. (Clinton could not be reached for comment.)

On a GoFundMe page titled "Fighting the Right," which he established early the following year, Grissom wrote that his tribute to Clinton "apparently enraged some particularly virulent Republicans," who thought his story was a paid-for lie. He claimed that three unnamed Republican congressmen "illegally seized" his bank accounts, and, in response, he sued them. Grissom eventually raised $35,929, which he said, on Facebook, would help him file these lawsuits and travel to Washington, D.C., to testify before Congress. Online, he chronicled at least seven supposed appearances, including before the House Oversight Committee. On January 18, 2019, he wrote, "Mueller is in the room. Is it inappropriate to give testimony with an erection?" He wrote in 2020 that he was grateful in particular to Nancy Pelosi, who had "been at my side for three years."

He was, he said, in litigation on other fronts, too. Grissom's former literary agent, Edward Hibbert, who sold "Follies" to Knopf, was one of the principals in the agency Donadio & Olson, which filed for bankruptcy in December, 2018, the same month that its former bookkeeper, Darin Webb, was sentenced to two years for embezzling more than $3.3 million. Grissom had posted that he was also "suing the literary agency that fucked me and others over." A search of relevant legal databases did not turn up any litigation with James Grissom's name attached to it, in New York or in the District of Columbia. Nor does his name appear in the *Congressional Record*. According to Pelosi's office, "Speaker Emerita Pelosi has no recollection of any interactions referenced in this reporting, and our office has no records of any interactions between them." (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that he has never threatened to sue anyone—"I pointed out to Kara Manning that her actions might be seen as actionable"—and that he can't discuss the congressional situation because of an N.D.A.)

The actress Martha Plimpton was a Facebook connection of Grissom's—he told her that Williams had noticed her as a child actor—and at first, Plimpton said, she let his dubious claims pass by. "He told me, 'I'm working with higher-ups at HBO, and I mentioned you for a major series.' And I

would just say, 'Oh, O.K., thank you,' " she said. Once Grissom started raising money to fight the right, Plimpton's discomfort increased. "I started noticing that more and more people were sharing these quotes from 'Follies of God' that were just clearly writing," she said. "They have the same kind of rambling, wonderfully fanciful, sympathetic quality to them." She unfriended Grissom, and posted about the lack of corroborating evidence in public records. In February, 2022, Grissom posted a Facebook screed about "people with whom I am working at HBO and Netflix" and about a certain unnamed actress who might be denied employment for her "slander."

He has also written, on Facebook, about working on various awards campaigns, including Natalie Portman's Oscar push for "Jackie." He described their growing intimacy and brought up Benjamin Millepied, Portman's husband: "I will post the video of me trying to get into and zip up a pair of pants belonging to Benjamin Millepied. Like a piano through a transom and funnier than Chaplin. I have a future in comedy, not to mention Millepied's pants." (A spokesperson from Portman's team said that she has never met Grissom. HBO has no record of his working for the company.)

When I asked Grissom if he had met Portman, he demurred. "Define 'meet,' " he said. When I mentioned the Clinton story and the ensuing lawsuits, he balked. When I asked to see evidence for "Follies," he brought up legal action. "And I don't think a defense will be 'He didn't want to show me certain things,' " he said.

In fact, he did provide some evidence. After our conversation, he sent me a tranche of images via direct message which included a piece of paper with actresses' names written in colored pencil (when I asked about the Court of Two Sisters menu, he said, "Tennessee asked the waiter and he brought me this linen-type paper"); a receipt of Jo Van Fleet's; e-mails from the actresses Madeleine Sherwood, Lois Smith, and Frances Sternhagen; and signed and dedicated copies of Seldes's and Elia Kazan's autobiographies. I was surprised that he did not include the signed and typewritten note from Hepburn,

which says, “Dear Jim Grissom— Too bad Tennessee never told me that— I thought he was—is and always will be remarkable”; it’s the only picture of personal correspondence in “Follies.”

He also sent me my own head shot, and asked if it was my “preferred photograph.”

He was more resistant to providing the Pinter tapes (“How much am I supposed to give?”), the letters from Seldes or the blue books or any contemporaneous notes (“I know what you want”), or anything in Williams’s hand. (“If a videotape appeared mysteriously tomorrow, like a Zapruder film, and it showed me with Tennessee sitting at a sidewalk café, I don’t think it would quell anything.”) He insisted that the book had been vetted by Knopf—“With Vicky, it’d be easier to go before The Hague,” he said, referring to his editor—and that the publisher had seen the materials I was inquiring about. In hour four of our call, I said, “I just don’t understand why you won’t let me see the stuff you’ve shown other people. If you’ve shown it to other people, it’s out there.” Grissom replied, “I’ve also not shown you my penis. I’ve shown other people. You know, there are times and places for things to be shown. . . . I don’t understand someone just showing up out of thin air and demanding to see documents.”

Our conversation ended cordially; we were talking about places near his home where we could meet to talk. But, about a week later, I realized that I had been blocked from both his personal Facebook page and the “Follies of God” Facebook page. Then Grissom sent me an e-mail. “Dear Ms. Shaw,” he wrote. “I am reaching out today to those entities in possession of my material comprising Follies of God. When I receive this material, we will make scans or photographs of relevant items.”

When I finally reached Edward Hibbert, he told me that he took on Grissom and his book after reading the sequence on Jo Van Fleet. It’s the finest writing in “Follies,” a compassionate but gimlet-eyed portrait of a

frustrated actress in her seventies. Grissom tells her that the choreographer Jerome Robbins has praised her, but she responds, "Fuck him! He never called me, never sent me a dime!" There's something terribly recognizable in Van Fleet's desperation not to be discarded. When Hibbert sold the book to Knopf, he vouched for it on the strength of that passage.

As Grissom turned in more sections, though, Hibbert "slowly, incrementally" lost faith, he told me, noting that "the interviews sound alike." He says he brought his concerns to Knopf, before publication, multiple times. (Knopf declined to comment on this point.)

Then, on May 28th, nearly two months after I'd asked to see his contemporaneous notes, Grissom e-mailed me twenty-six photographs of handwritten pages, including an undated diary entry ("can I help him be a writer again?"), five closely written pages from an exam booklet with scenes that appear in "Follies," and notes on conversations with Alec Guinness and Harold Pinter. There was also a photo of the front of a 1991 journal. I asked where these documents had been—Knopf had told me that he was recovering them from archives—and he e-mailed back, "They were not at Ransom. I seriously considered Ransom, but people who looked over the things I had suggested other places. That is all I will say." (Harvard, Columbia, and the Historic New Orleans Collection do not show records of any of Grissom's Williams material in their digital catalogues.) I asked to see the documents in person; he declined. I asked if Knopf had seen them before now; he did not reply. I showed the Alec Guinness materials to Hibbert, and he wrote, "I've seen none of them nor did he show me any of these pages."

Knopf offered the following statement, delivered through an attorney:

In his contract with Knopf for FOLLIES OF GOD, James Grissom warranted that the content of the book was entirely factual. He stands by that guarantee. Grissom's source materials included in-person interviews with both Tennessee Williams and actresses who performed his works, as well as the author's copious notes from which the book was drawn. In the seven years since its publication, participants in FOLLIES such as Lois

Smith, Marian Seldes, and others never wavered in their support for the book nor challenged Grissom's narrative.

(Seldes died the year before the book came out.)

Grissom's highly shareable quotations have carried his work far. The whisper network has done its bit to counteract his influence; the academic cold shoulder has, too. But Grissom's material continues to be more widely distributed than anything written in *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. And it can be hard to be definitive about which voices ring true. When I asked Antonia Fraser, Harold Pinter's widow, if Grissom's blogged interviews with Pinter sounded like him, she was divided. "I do not recognise Harold's voice in 'We Will Die of Stupidity,' " she responded. Of the other three I sent her, she thought two "could possibly be interviews with Harold."

What do Grissom's friends think of all this? Lois Smith—the last major figure quoted in "Follies" who is alive and able to answer questions—declined to speak with me. (The e-mail from her that he shared noted that they met in 1990.) The actor Lusia Strus met Grissom in 2016 and they were close for two years; she allowed their relationship to drift after he told her that Michael Avenatti, Stormy Daniels's lawyer, was hanging out in his apartment in his undershirt. She simply didn't believe him, but she is loath to judge. "He is reacting to life in this particular way," she said. "Nothing that he has said or done has been super harmful to anybody—it's just not real." (Grissom told *The New Yorker* that his comment about Avenatti was a joke.)

So, indeed, what is the harm? Grissom did pay attention to those who might have felt forgotten and gave them the gift of adoration by one of our most beloved American playwrights. And, in videos from his last few years, Williams slurs his words and looks somehow clammy—it would be nice to believe he met an eager student and talked to him about writing instead of about death.

In "Follies," Williams is certainly energetic, at once bombastic and dewy-

eyed: “I try to approach the whiteness of the page, the pale judgment, as if I were a neophyte priest. . . . I touch it gently, a frightened queer faced with his first female breast, a nipple that seeks attention and ministration.”

If you’re a Williams scholar, or a Pinter devotee, or a Brando biographer, though, the issue seems clear-cut: Grissom is confusing an already fragile record. William J. Mann, the biographer, said, “There’s great harm in it. We’re living in a period right now where facts increasingly don’t matter.” That said, he’s willing to give “Follies” a certain place. “I love fan fiction! I love historical fiction,” Mann said. “But don’t pass it off as truth.”

James Frey exaggerated his life story in “A Million Little Pieces”; Clifford Irving invented an entire Howard Hughes autobiography and nearly got away with it. The former was a best-seller; the latter garnered a big advance. The creation of “Follies” and its associated ventures has not been all that financially lucrative. Williams didn’t make Grissom rich. “I never got even poor,” he said. But his connection to Williams has helped Grissom become part of a glittering twentieth-century theatrical legacy. He wanted access to a certain world, and he found it—Katharine Hepburn wrote him, whether or not they ate ice cream together. As I was researching this piece, I ordered a used copy of “Remember Me to Tom,” and two notes from the actual Edwina Williams dropped out. History fell hot into my hands. I can understand chasing that strange, electrical feeling.

When I was in New Orleans, I went to all the places Grissom says he visited with Williams. Most of the cafés were overrun, but there were quiet street corners with personal resonance for the playwright where, according to “Follies,” they spent time. Some looked like their descriptions, some didn’t. I sat in Jackson Square and listened to a mockingbird running through its catalogue of impressions—catbird, car alarm, chickadee. I was trying to summon images of my own. Did twenty-year-old James Grissom ever meet Tennessee Williams at all? John Guare, who delights in ambiguity, thinks he might have (though he said that, given the amount of material, they must

have talked "on that park bench for fourteen years"). John Lahr and Ellen F. Brown don't rule it out, and Brown, who places Williams in Key West and New York around the early fall of 1982, can't say for sure where the playwright was for about two weeks in mid-September.

At Books & Books in Florida, Grissom told his audience that "I am Tennessee Williams material," referring to his post-flight dishabille. During our interview, Grissom complained that the constant demands that he show proof were tiring. "All the burden has been put on me to kind of dance and pull things out. And, you know, it's like Blanche pulling things out of her trunk. And—I'm hurt by it," he said. In "Streetcar," Blanche keeps all her papers and costume jewelry in a trunk; her brother-in-law Stanley is rough with her tinsel finery because at first he mistakes it for treasure. But I didn't see Blanche in Jackson Square, or Tennessee Williams, either. Instead, I thought of the young Jimmy Grissom, the boy who sent short stories to his theatrical idol, looking for advice. Where were all the books and stories and plays that he came to New York to write? He was going to do so much. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of an event at which James Grissom spoke in 2009.

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