

His Other Life: Searching for My Father, His First Wife, and Tennessee Williams

Melanie McCabe

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McCabe details a true story of love, loss, and a young woman's tragic end, all through the mysteries of her family's past.

Melanie McCabe's *His Other Life* details an intriguingly twisted genealogical journey that uncovers secrets and heartbreak, while also involving one of America's best-known playwrights. In May of 2013, McCabe received an e-mail from a friend noting that Tennessee Williams's play *The Red Devil Battery Sign* featured a character named Terrence McCabe—which was also Melanie's late father's name. The coincidence intrigued her.

McCabe eventually discovered that the same names were not coincidental, and that her father's tempestuous first marriage had been to Williams's childhood sweetheart, Hazel Kramer. Williams had been smitten with Kramer's vivacious beauty for years. Though he would later pursue same-sex relationships, when Kramer wed Terrence McCabe in 1935, Williams wrote that he felt like the "sky had fallen."

In *His Other Life*, McCabe skillfully creates a dual portrait of her father. She shows him as her loving and protective parent, but also as the younger man she never knew: a lanky aspiring writer with "chiseled cheekbones" who married a high-spirited redhead he met at university.

Her father kept his first marriage and its eventual annulment a secret from his daughter, just as he never mentioned knowing Tennessee Williams. Following his second marriage and the birth of his children, that chapter of Terrence's life remained discreetly closed.

Piecing together clues from Williams's biographies, her father's writings, and dogged genealogical research, McCabe details a true story of love, loss, and Kramer's ultimately tragic end at the age of thirty-eight. Exuberant, excessive, and complex, Kramer drifted from happier years in college and Greenwich Village to alcoholism, drug abuse, and a mysterious, film-noir-ish death in a Mexico City hotel room.

As is often the case in trying to retrace the past, certain questions simply remain unanswered. Letters are lost or destroyed, recollections fade, and key clues lie moldering in a trunk in someone's attic. Nonetheless, McCabe's eloquent determination to investigate this mystery—sleuthing online, contacting descendants, and entering archives full of "carbon paper and ghosts"—gives *His Other Life* a historical and literary resonance that is charged with modern energy.

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