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BIOGRAPHY

In the Frightened Heart of Me: Tennessee Williams's Last Year
Tony Narducci
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Searing and loving, this intelligently constructed scrapbook of a friendship is a must-read.

A heart-wrenching exploration of what happens when our heroes come to life, Tony Narducci's memoir recalls one extraordinary year, in the early eighties, when he became the trusted confidant of and companion to the enigmatic playwright Tennessee Williams. It was a year in which Narducci vacillated between searching for direction in his own life as an artist and trying to understand and befriend a man whom he'd considered for so long to be brilliant and beyond reach.

One balmy Miami night, Narducci runs into Williams, his childhood idol, on the stairs of a nightclub. He reaches out to steady the luminary, who teeters on aging legs. Their meeting is punctuated by Narducci's introduction of a line from Williams's own canon. The playwright, taken by the learned young artist, responds with a gracious invitation upstairs for a drink. So begins their year-long intimate friendship that veers toward a sexual relationship in the beginning but is primarily directed by the deep loneliness Williams feels in his later years.

The playwright is determined not to live out his worst fear: that he'd die alone. He confesses to Narducci that not even the love of his life, Frankie, had managed to return the passion he'd offered. Now, in his twilight, he hopes only for companionship. He addresses the adoring Narducci, who loves Williams's work but feels no desire toward him, as "baby," and draws him in with soul-baring confessions, exclusive seatings at play premieres, introductions to people ranging from Vanessa Redgrave to Mother Teresa, and hints of trips to the wilds abroad.

Narducci's connection to the playwright is directed by a mixture of fascination and compassion, as well as recognition that some hunger in the artist's soul is echoed in his own. Still, the author finds himself unable to return Williams's interest in equal measure, and their plan for an extended trip to Australia falls through. Narducci receives word of the playwright's

death shortly thereafter. He mourns for his friend. Still, obituary references to Narducci as the Sicilian who'd broken Williams's heart begged correction. This project, by examining how celebrity obscures the reality of people's lives, is a partial attempt to address that misconception.

Narducci's pages are candid and incisive, though his descriptions are sometimes weakened by an overreliance on adverbs. He laughs loudly, moves slowly, reacts quickly, asks incredulously, and in the midst of this, we lose our grasp on who he is. Still, Narducci's decision to hold little back and to interweave illuminating portions of Williams's own work into his own attests to his continued admiration for the writer. These pages also expose Williams's humanity: his insecurities, his wounds, his hungers, and his half-truths are all given a place.

The portrait Narducci paints may be unfamiliar to Williams devotees, but it's one they shouldn't miss. A searing and loving memoir that warrants a film adaptation, this intelligently constructed scrapbook of a friendship is a must-read.

Michelle Anne Schingler