



# Shakespeare: The Biography

*Peter Ackroyd*

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## **Shakespeare: The Biography** Peter Ackroyd

Drawing on an exceptional combination of skills as literary biographer, novelist, and chronicler of London history, Peter Ackroyd surely re-creates the world that shaped Shakespeare--and brings the playwright himself into unusually vivid focus. With characteristic narrative panache, Ackroyd immerses us in sixteenth-century Stratford and the rural landscape--the industry, the animals, even the flowers--that would appear in Shakespeare's plays. He takes us through Shakespeare's London neighborhood and the fertile, competitive theater world where he worked as actor and writer. He shows us Shakespeare as a businessman, and as a constant reviser of his writing. In joining these intimate details with profound intuitions about the playwright and his work, Ackroyd has produced an altogether engaging masterpiece.

## **Shakespeare: The Biography Details**

Date : Published November 14th 2006 by Anchor (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9781400075980

Author : Peter Ackroyd

Format : Paperback 608 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, History, Biography Memoir

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# From Reader Review Shakespeare: The Biography for online ebook

## Katheryn Thompson says

This just feels like the definitive book on Shakespeare.

Ackroyd moves chronologically through Shakespeare's life, from birth to death, breaking the book into short chapters (which make reading easier), and tying together what is known about Shakespeare from his plays and from the world beyond the stage. It's a fascinating book, which immerses the reader in Shakespeare's world, although it might be worth noting that this biography is probably best enjoyed by a reader with a reasonable knowledge of Shakespeare's plays.

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## Rebecca Budd says

There is a lot that has been said about William Shakespeare. Everyone has an opinion on who he was, who he was not, what he wrote etc. The debate goes on, even after 400 years of his passing in 1616. Therein lies the true brilliance of literature – the compelling force to continue the conversation.

Goodreads is celebrating Shakespeare Week (August 18 – 23, 2016), which includes quizzes, book lists and an invitation to write a “deleted scene” from one of the Bard’s plays. Shakespeare would be pleased, no doubt.

I first met Shakespeare when I read Macbeth and confess that I had a partiality to the unfortunate Lady Macbeth.

“But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we’ll not fail.”  
William Shakespeare, Macbeth

Then came The Taming of the Shrew (wasn’t Elizabeth Taylor magnificent):

“Sit by my side, and let the world slip: we shall ne’er be younger.”  
William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew

Followed thereafter by Hamlet, Romeo & Juliet, Twelfth Night, King Lear, Julius Caesar, and Henry V:

“We few. We happy few.  
We band of brothers, for he today  
That sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother.”  
William Shakespeare, Henry V

Peter Ackroyd’s, Shakespeare, the Biography brought it all together for me. This is not an easy read, by any stretch of the imagination, but after all, he is writing about William Shakespeare. My husband, my son and I listened to the audio-book version while driving in the car, which allowed us to integrate knowledge

incrementally. We were taken back to the sixteen century and imagined that we were part of the audience. Even more exciting, we followed William from his childhood to his final night, when he met with friends for the last celebration before the curtain closed on a life well-lived.

This last quote is one that I embrace as I move forward in my timeline...

“With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.”

William Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice

<https://ontheroadbookclub.com/2016/04...>

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### **Tim says**

A fascinating, masterful, and detailed look into the life of the greatest figure in English literature. Any such biographical endeavor would be a daunting task, but Ackroyd handles it beautifully and, surprisingly, more than adeptly. Despite its length, taking the reader from the playwright's birth in Stratford-upon-Avon (even going backward and glancing into a brief history of his parents) to his childhood, and then his rich adulthood, it is a very satisfying read. Ackroyd very creatively takes a line here and there from Shakespeare's plays and applies it to a particular instance in the man's life; each play, in fact, gets its own bit of time in the limelight. I think, more important than anything else, Ackroyd recognized the RESPONSIBILITY that came with taking on a book of this magnitude and of this subject--and he doesn't let us down, doesn't disappoint by any means.

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### **Brooklyn Tayla says**

Hands down, one of the best biographies I've ever read. So engaging and enthralling; I learnt SO much and couldn't put it down. Definitely recommend for fans of The Bard & his works.

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### **booklady says**

Very worthwhile book on Shakespeare! Although he is still ‘the mystery man’, the author has researched the era, his family, theatre life, religious differences and the locales of London and Stratford and presents the known facts—as well as the gaping holes—as Shakespeare’s life unfolds.

It is not difficult to see, thanks to Ackroyd’s explanations, why Shakespeare remains such an elusive figure.

There are reasons. It was a dangerous time for one, especially with respect to which side of the religious street you happened to be standing on when. England went back and forth between Catholic, Protestant, back to Catholic and then finally to remain Protestant all in less than 50 years—the span of one man’s lifetime. Who knew if that might change again?

Shakespeare’s own father suffered most of his life for his determination to hang on to the ‘Old Faith’—something which could have made his son more cautious in allowing himself private beliefs and thoughts much less being forthright about them.

Ackroyd also gave the ins and outs of the dangers inherent in theatre life, something still novel in late 16th, early 17th Century Britain. The risks were greatest for playwrights, who might write something heretical or treasonous, intentionally or no. Shakespeare's contemporary and competitor, Christopher Marlowe, died at 29 (stabbed to death) under mysterious circumstances, something which no doubt would have affected WS.

Shakespeare's own death at 53 in Stratford-on-Avon was unremarkable and unattended except for family and some friends. Even his cause of death remains a mystery. For such a great man, so much remains conjecture. And yet, we love his words and it is those we know so well!

Ackroyd focuses on the plays, characters, and memorable dialogue throughout, something akin to a tour through a bakery. Let me out of here or let me eat one of everything! At least...!

Most enjoyable and most frustrating! Bring on those plays...!

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October 1, 2017: We are almost finished! One CD (out of 16) left. Normally audiobooks don't take us so long. This one has taken longer, no doubt because of our frequent breaks for discussion. Dear husband has no familiarity with Shakespeare which has led to many interesting conversations. Also, the CDs are very long so we are reluctant to start another unless early in evening.

August 18, 2017: I am a fan of Ackroyd bios... Have been wanting to read this one on the Bard for a long time.

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## **Pete daPixie says**

I find the writings of Peter Ackroyd to be veritable delights. I have read 'London-The Biography' as well as 'Thames: Sacred River' and this author simply oozes with a profound knowledge of 'the smoke', it's environs and it's populace. Although these books are quite hefty volumes, his writing is extremely erudite and set out in short chapters that make his tomes hard to put down.

'Shakespeare-The Biography' takes bardolatry up to a whole new level. In view of the fact that personal records of Will o' the wisp are like gold dust and that even the dramatists works provoke debates regarding authenticity, any biography at all seems beyond reach, or as Ackroyd so eloquently puts it, 'lost in the voracious maw of time and forgetfulness'.

Yet, such is the unique expertise of Ackroyd's grasp of Elizabethan London, coupled with a professorial perception of the Shakespearian canon, the mists of four hundred years are lifted to produce a portrait of fantastic clarity.

Certainly this work on the Bard of Avon has been produced by some imaginative reading between the lines, with many anomalous or intuitive perceptions that side step the ambiguous and scant records. None the less, I was transported back in time in a Wellsian machine, and any thoughts of disputed authorship with Kyd, Marlowe, Wriothesley, deVere etc., can be discounted.

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## Carla says

Consegui unir muitas "pontas soltas" sobre Shakespeare mas, ainda assim, sob muitos aspectos continua a ser invisível... Quase parece uma criação de um dramaturgo Isabelino. Uma personagem.

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## Libby says

It is O'dark thirty in the morning and I have just finished this Marvelous Book. You'll note I used capitals which I did on purpose because this book is something very special. It is hard to find non-fiction which reads lyrically like poetry. Some very fine authors, most of them British, do manage this feat and Peter Ackroyd has done it here. Perhaps he was inspired by his great subject matter.

For a brief disclaimer I'll admit up front that I worship every syllable Shakespeare ever wrote. I have been privileged in the past to enact some of his plays and there is no magic quite like that. When the lines begin to flow, I'll swear you can SEE the energy flowing from stage to audience and back. It's SSOOOOO good!

Some of that energy seems to have osmosed into Ackroyd's high-spirited bio. He deals evocatively with Shakespeare's youth, of his apparent love of nature and the countryside, of the possible ways he spent the so-called lost years, of his family etc, etc. He deftly presents issues that have been debated for hundreds of years, such as was Shakespeare a crypto-Catholic? Did he have marital troubles? How did he think and feel about his writings? Which plays were written when? Ackroyd addresses them all with style and gusto. I'm so impressed with amount of research he had to have done to write this; his bibliography is eleven pages long. Whoo dogies! That's a lot of reading! Along the way somewhere he seems to have absorbed ton of data about the Elizabethan world in much the way Shakespeare himself seems to have done. There are juicy bits about legal matters, courts, deeds, fines and the training of lawyers. There is herb-craft and other medicine, music and dance, daily manners and courtly behavior, and a funny bit with a dog. (OK, I stole that last bit, but so did Shakespeare and Jonson and Marlowe and Kyd!) And did you know that at one time Will lodged at the corner of Silver and Muggle streets? Ya gotta love it! Coming in at a hefty 518 pages, there's a lot to love here.

This wonderful bio will appeal to those who love Tudor and Stuart England as well as to lovers of the Bard and literature in general.

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## Megan says

I am so sick of reading "biographies" that are basically glorified fiction. The amount of factual information that scholars know about Shakespeare from Statford on Avon could fit into this review box! The other 588 pages of this "'biography" is filler: guesses, conjectures and basic bs.

The author himself says that many biographers will assume Shakespeare was a sailor because he uses so many technical sailing terms in his works, but the author decides instead that Shakespeare came from a farming background, based on his use of so many technical farming terms in his works. Seriously? You use the same basic litmus test to decide he's a farmer that you used to bash anyone who thought he was a sailor?

That's when I gave up.

Forget that the author doesn't even stop to mention that the Shakespeare he's biographing up to this point, the Shakespeare from Stratford on Avon, may not even be the same guy that wrote all the plays and poems. He doesn't mention that there are all of five actual examples of this Shakespeare's handwriting and that ~none~ of them match the handwriting we have of bard's plays or poems or various other works.

This is just lazy fiction disguised as fact.

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### **James Hartley says**

Reading through what other reviewers have said summarises what my own thoughts on this one. Worth reading for the background to Shakespeare and his life but as infuriating and grasping as most biographies of the bard when trying to pin down the details. Calling any book a biography of Shakespeare should be a violation of the Trades Description Act as there's simply not much to know about him: scholars have even picked to bits the first so-called biographies written only a generation after he lived. Having said this, though, this book - and all the others - do provide colour and context and interesting information to anyone interested in Shakespeare, the times or the plays. As far as a good reading experience goes, this one is rather uneven. Felt a wee bit of a chore at times.

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### **Caroline says**

You'd think by now there'd be nothing new to say on Shakespeare, no more interesting insights to make, no way to take what little we know of him and make it justify yet another biography - and yet this book succeeds marvellously. Peter Ackroyd is a wonderful biographer - his biography of London is a triumph - and he always manages to make his material come alive, which to be fair is not hard when you're dealing with the words of Master Shakespeare.

I think I've yet to read a bad biography of Shakespeare - and there's a reason for that. Any biography of Shakespeare is as much as biography of the plays as it is the man himself, and with such material to work with how can you go wrong? It's partly why I've...to say I've not been interested is the wrong word, because if it's Shakespeare of course I'm interested...let's say I've been somewhat aloof from the arguments that continue to rage about whether Shakespeare really wrote Shakespeare. As the man himself said, 'the play's the thing'. Someone wrote these plays and we might as well call that someone Shakespeare for lack of anything else.

Because material on Shakespeare himself is so scarce, so much of this biography is populated with information about the era, the politics, the fashions, the fads, the personalities at Court and in the streets, Shakespeare's friends and his rivals, and all of that is just as interesting as Shakespeare, perhaps if I dare say even more so. Perhaps the reason there is so little information on Shakespeare is because Shakespeare was not all that interesting as a person? After all, we assume that geniuses must be towering figures, but perhaps he was just a small ordinary man with an extraordinary gift. We should treasure the fact we have the pleasure of that gift and not bemoan the lack of the man himself.

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## Wayland Smith says

Peter Ackroyd is a wordy writer. He's the same way as a biographer, as well. But he does a lot of research and provided a very detailed telling of the life of Shakespeare, or at least, as much as is known. It's a bit dry at times, and there's a lot of speculation, but then, there's a lot we don't know about Shakespeare's actual life.

There are some really interesting facts along the way, like a young woman in his town who fell into a river and drowned... unless it was suicide... and her family name was Hamlet. There is also a lot of detail about the events happening around Shakespeare put into historical perspective, like the persecution of Catholics at the time, or recurring outbreaks of plague forcing theaters to close.

Recommended to big fans of Shakespeare or history of that time.

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## Terry Bonner says

At predictable intervals over the course of the last four centuries, some cynical iconoclast has suggested that William Shakespeare was a simple-minded actor from the hinterlands who was hired by an Oxford-educated aristocrat to serve as the public face for his plays. The latest incarnation of this hackneyed libel against Shakespeare is last year's box office bomb ANONYMOUS, which rather shamelessly attributes Shakespeare's canon to the Earl of Oxford. These Anti-Stratfordists are, of course, the very worst sort of intellectual elitists who indulge themselves in the most juvenile sort of contempt for history and historical method. But they almost always get noticed by the popular press and their claptrap is usually successful at muddying the waters and undermining the reputation of England's greatest literary figure.

Ackroyd, like Schoenbaum a generation ago, goes to great lengths to present the wealth of records extant from Shakespeare's life. William Shakespeare left a rather substantial historical footprint. He was not some bucolic rube from a provincial backwater, but instead was the well-educated, bourgeois firstborn son of the Mayor of Stratford-Upon-Avon. Shakespeare's father John, as well as his mother Mary Arden, left a rather huge footprint in the records of their time. The same is true for John Shakespeare's neighbors, brothers and business associates. These were serious and substantial people. The fact that they were Recusivists (Catholic stalwarts during the time of emergent Anglicanism) insured that that their footprints would be subtle, but they were undeniable.

Shakespeare himself appears to have been indifferent to religion. His familiarity with the ritual of the mass, as well as his acquaintance with the cycle of medieval morality plays and his contacts in the Recusivist underground, gave him access to the nascent world of the Elizabethan stage. Ironically, Shakespeare was very much like the way Joseph Finnes portrayed him in SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE. He was very young (22), extremely good looking and thoroughly competent as both a player and a playwright. He intuitively understood how to please huge crowds in this egalitarian new medium, and the convergence of his personal talent with the times, the technology and the emerging industry of mass entertainment combined into a synergy of genius.

Unlike his friends and rivals, most notably Jonson and Marlowe, Shakespeare never aspired to be England's preeminent playwright. His obsession appears to have been with becoming a "gentleman". To this end, he was meticulous about his investments, and he was purposeful and deliberate in his associations. When he died of typhoid fever in 1616, he was one of the best known celebrities in England and was the wealthiest



landowner in Warwickshire. He was also, by the standards of the day, an old man -- having reached the age of 52 in an era when 40 was considered old.

Ackroyd goes to great lengths to provide evidence for the provenance of each and every word attributed to Shakespeare. While the contemporaneous citations of his works are abundant and conclusive, the real bona fides for the Shakespearean corpus lies in the words themselves. Shakespeare's language is the dialect of his native Warwickshire, a fact now lost to modern audiences simply because of Shakespeare's success. His provincial patois became the standard for modern English, but it is an easy leap to recover the lyrical west county lilt in his elegant iambs.

This biography is well worth your time. You will walk away from it with a better appreciation for the role individuals have played in the epic history of the world. This winsome youth with a pleasing accent, by dogged persistence in his trade, created something wonderful and rare. Along the way, he unintentionally earned a place beside Homer, Vergil and Dante as the one of the great poets of mankind.

The closest I personally have ever come to a mystical experience was when, as very earnest and guileless twenty-two year old, I first knelt alone and in silence at the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-Upon-Avon. I remember feeling subsumed in an almost dissociative reaction to the overwhelming humanity and dignity of this eternal place. It was so simple, so pure, so unassuming. In short, it was so very human, a timeless reminder of everything awesome and miraculous about just being human.

That, in the end, is the essence of Shakespeare's greatness. He spent his entire life trying to become an English gentleman. Quite by accident, he became one of the immortal voices of mankind. That is a magic you cannot learn at Oxford.

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## Harry Rutherford says

The definite article in the title seems a little hubristic. I don't know if this is *the* definitive biography of Shakespeare — haven't read any of the hundreds of others — but I certainly enjoyed it.

I don't know if I completely trust Ackroyd as a historian; it's probably unfair, but I just get a nagging sense sometimes that he's a bit too fond of a good story. He has clearly done a ton of research, though, and as you'd expect he's very good at providing historical context. And he writes well.

There's a perception, perhaps, that we have very little historical record of Shakespeare other than the plays themselves, so if anything I was surprised by how much material there was: legal stuff, references to him in other people's writing and so on. Certainly there's enough to build up a broad-brush picture of his life. What there isn't is much that is truly personal: no letters back and forth between London and Stratford, no learned essays on theatrical technique, no gossipy personal journal.

So instead of the common pattern of literary biographies, where the biographer tries to use the details of the life to shed light on the work, here it's more often the other way round: trying to mine the plays and poems for details that might tell us something about his life. It's all hints and scraps, and any conclusions are tentative and contingent, but it's all quite interesting even so.

In the end, I think Shakespeare remains elusive: but then, if we knew every moment of his life, I suspect it would only serve to emphasise the fundamental mysteriousness of genius. What biographical detail could

possibly be adequate as an explanation?

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## **Riku Sayuj says**

*“Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare.*

*So far from Shakespeare’s being the least known, he is the one person in all modern history fully known to us.”*

~ Emerson

### **The Obscure & The Elusive**

This ‘biography’ that Ackroyd strings together is mostly tedious, though it has a few really good moments and it has to be admitted that it presents most of the facts that is known of the great Bard. In spite of this, I think it is a mistake to pick up this bio unless one is familiar with ALL the plays of Shakespeare, including the controversially attributed ones - since Ackroyd constructs the bio mostly through the plays and the lines and extrapolating from them, tying together with some skill the fragmentary traces Shakespeare left in the world outside the stage.

The fact that whatever is pieced together from outside plays is from the patchy legal records of Shakespeare’s land dealings, taxes paid, borrowings/lendings, cases filed, and so on, should give an idea of the tedium involved. The saving grace is when Shakespeare’s contemporary critics step in to spice it up by naive statements that posterity was destined to have hearty laughs at.

Also, Ackroyd tries to do it both ways - understand the life through the plays and then understand the plays through the life. Which makes a bit of a mess in figuring out where the circle closes. Also, Ackroyd seems to lean towards reading the life into the work when the life can be read out of the work.

Maybe, much of Shakespeare’s existence was the very construction of his plays, and these in turn might tell us more about him than can the set of random anecdotes that have escaped the distortions of history and Shakespeare’s own efforts to maintain a private life, that Ackroyd tires so hard to dig out. If Ackroyd had stuck to a consistent plan either way, we might have had a much more coherent work.

In the end, the ‘bio’ is definitely useful in understanding Shakespeare’s London (which included the audiences, stage, limitations of the stage, audience expectations), what is known of his life (with shadings of childhood influences, dramatic/poetic progress, worldly progress, family troubles/tragedies/ambitions), and the London Stage itself (including economic conditions and preoccupations, major rivals, the dramatic scene of the time, the actors, the interaction b/w actors and characters).

This is all very admirable, but the question is how much of all this information is needed for understanding his plays - especially when his greatest genius was apparently in being conspicuous by his absence in his works! Ackroyd asserts this himself and thus nullifies his entire effort, in one fell swoop. (if you detect a contradiction in the review here, it is intended to show the same contradiction apparent in the book)

In addition Ackroyd is known to present speculation as concluded fact and reader has to keep his guard up

throughout the book, which is very tiring to be honest, and not quite worth the effort.

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