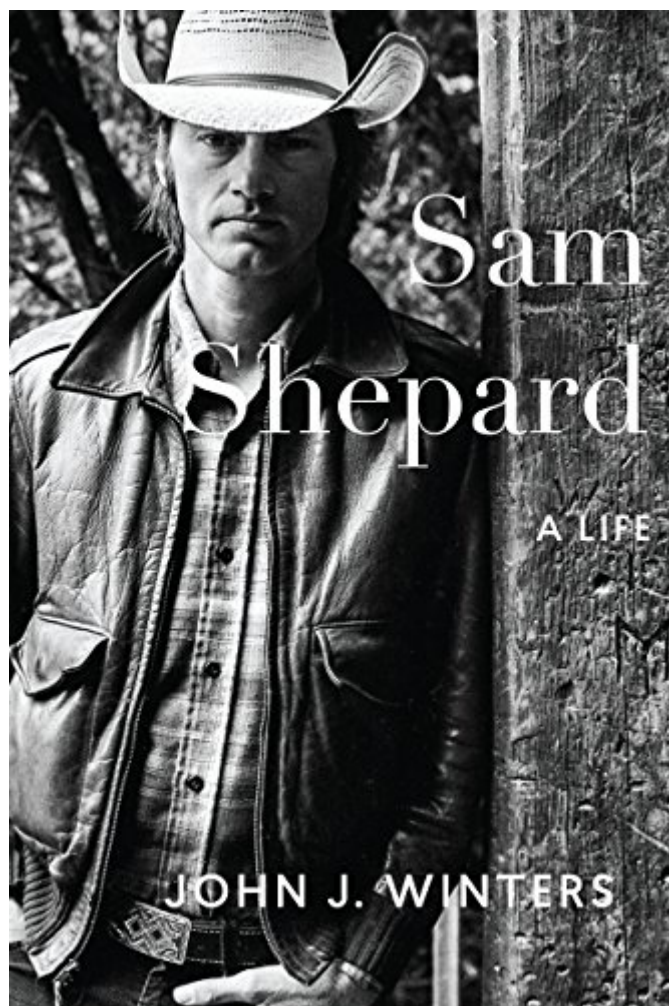


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# Sam Shepard: A Life



## Synopsis

"John Winters offers a master class in literary sleuthing, untangling the many lives and unearthing the origin story of America's foremost Renaissance man of letters, Sam Shepard." —Kelly Horan, WBUR radio

With more than fifty-five plays to his credit—including the 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child*—an Oscar nod for his portrayal of Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*, and an onscreen persona that's been aptly summed up as "Gary Cooper in denim," Sam Shepard's impact on American theater and film ranks with the greatest playwrights and actors of the past half-century. Despite these accomplishments and more—six collections of prose, songwriting with Bob Dylan, filmmaking with Robert Frank and Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as romantic relationships with rocker Patti Smith and actress Jessica Lange—Shepard seems anything but satisfied. *Sam Shepard: A Life* details his lifelong bouts of insecurity and anxiety, and delves deeply into his relationship with his alcoholic father and his own battle with the bottle. Also examined for the first time in-depth are Shepard's tumultuous relationship with Lange, and his decades-long adherence to the teachings of Russian spiritualist G. I. Gurdjieff. Throughout this new biography, Winters gets to the heart of the enigma that is Sam Shepard, presenting a compelling and comprehensive account of his life and work.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Very mixed feelings about this book. While I am interested in Shepard the playwright, I am more interested in the man and to some extent his movies. This book is drenched in the plays. Almost every play, every plot, every outcome, no matter how obscure. It dominates the book. To be fair, he really does reveal the man behind the plays, his demons and phases of his life. I feel the author was somewhat less interested in dissecting his movies, although again to be fair, they are represented. I come close to offering a fourth star, it is so well researched and detailed. And someone massively interested in the playwright would be in heaven here. It just didn't fit the proportion of what I was looking for.

I was always curious about Sam Shepard. I had known of his work as a playwright and then, when his acting career began to take off, I thought he wasn't getting much notoriety, at least in the popular culture, for someone so accomplished in so many different areas. Since then, I've especially been interested in his fiction—the short story collections (*Motel Chronicles*, *Cruising Paradise*, *Great Dream of Heaven*, *Day out of Days*, *Hawk Moon*) and now his first novel, *The One Inside*. His fiction is deeply brooding and autobiographical, much like his acting and much like *Paris, Texas*, maybe his best known movie. So I wondered about the person. Winters' biography certainly scratches that itch. He begins with Shepard's family history, speculating, on the basis of Shepard's own "musings," back as far as the *Mayflower*. Winters pays special attention to Shepard's father's side of the family, setting up themes to trace later not only through Shepard's real life relationship to his father, but also through so much of Shepard's writing. Shepard's childhood story centers around his time growing up in Bradbury, California, near Pasadena. I have to admit to a little bit of surprise at how "normal" his childhood and teenage years appear. Winters even includes a photograph of Shepard (then known as "Steve Rogers") as a yell leader in high school, and notes his participation in track and basketball, as well as the 4-H Club. There are certainly hints of his wavering from the straight and narrow—Shepard has said that he broke a high school track record while on Benzedrine. Shepard also got involved in drama and theater in high

school, in school plays and in acting lessons. In fact, he seems to have found numerous long-lived passions — animals, music, and theater — early in life. He received special encouragement in theater during his time at Mt. San Antonio College in California, writing his first play during that time. But it is his relationship with his father that provides the strongest running theme throughout the book. Shepard's father was a violent alcoholic, who seemed to lose his way early in Sam's life, after service in World War II as a pilot. The struggle in the relationship gets played and replayed throughout Shepard's plays, so many of which explore broken versions of family life. In his own life, Shepard is haunted by the fear that he will turn into his own father, and, at many points, he seems to have done exactly that. One great difference of course, is art. Unlike his father, Shepard plays that drama out in the theater for all to see. His later years are still mired in that same tortuous play of alcohol, broken relationships, and the inner struggles that make Shepard a world champion at the brooding self-reflection we see in all his writings and even in his acting. I enjoyed the book, mainly because of my own curiosity about Shepard, and how such a person as accomplished as he is, and as troubled as he is, came to be. People who choose the path of art, over more stable and secure professional lives, have always interested me — something must have driven them in that direction and kept them going, given the strong pull of "normalcy" — back into the straight and narrow. Shepard seems unlikely to ever be pulled in. The book does not flow as easily as some biographies. It is less thematic narrative than chronicle of events — the themes do arise, but as a reader, your own curiosity has to compel you to find and savor them.

This cannot be considered a true biography... and perhaps we'll never get one, given the elusive nature of the subject. But the author relies heavily on Shepard's work as being "autobiographical" as describing his relationship with his Father. The various plays are described in great detail, intended to give insight into Shepard's feelings. OK to a point, but overdone. The latter part of the book is better, describing his long, turbulent relationship with Jessica Lange, but is still reliant on a lot of quotes, rather than anything firsthand. Given that Shepard is such an interesting subject, I was a bit disappointed. If you're fascinated by Shepard, I'm sure you'll like it. The "biography" is yet to come.

I have probably read every play, short story, and book written by Sam Shepard, so this book was a must for me. Winters puts together the complexity of Shepard's life and background, including all the forces that have shaped this astonishingly talented writer's life and work. Shepard is our

greatest living playwright, and understanding his life provides brilliant insight into the prolific works he has given us. What a fantastic book!!!

This book was beyond difficult to get into. The author was over-analyzing a previous biography and Sam Shepard's own words and stories. He goes on and on about whether or not Shepard is Shepard the Third, the Seventh or the fifth in his family line. Who cares and what difference does it make???? I'm going to look for that other biography to read, I think Sam Shepard is an interesting person.

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