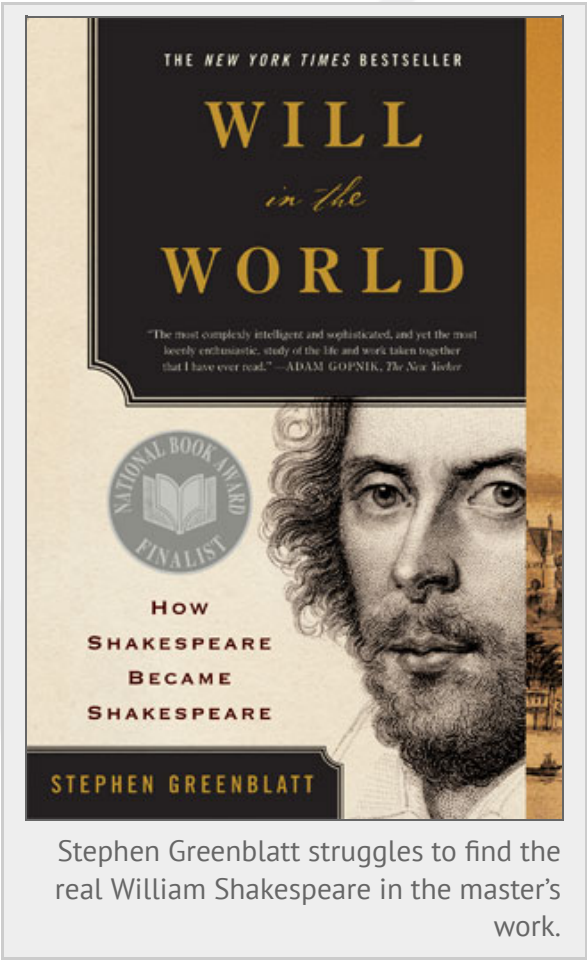


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Bookshelf: Will in the World by Stephen Greenblatt

By [Michelle Nijhuis](#) on July 10, 2013 | [Leave a response](#)



Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare may not sound like a model for science journalists. But this 2004 history of Shakespeare’s life and times, by scholar [Stephen Greenblatt](#), deals deftly with a storytelling challenge familiar to many of us. (Not incidentally, it’s also a complete pleasure to read.) What to do with an overexposed subject – Shakespeare, climate change, insert your beat here – when the specifics are still maddeningly uncertain?

Greenblatt starts by peeling off familiar lore to reveal a core mystery. While we know Shakespeare’s work and a few facts about his life, we don’t know how a young man from a small town – without a university education or family connections – managed to write what Greenblatt calls “the most important body of imaginative literature of the last thousand years.” What connected the life

Shakespeare lived to the literature he created? It’s a tantalizing question, one capable of pulling the reader in for a long ride.

Once he’s made his tired subject fresh, Greenblatt faces another, even bigger problem: He can’t answer his own question. The evidence from Shakespeare’s life is too sparse and too murky to tell us much, if anything, about the workings of his mind. So Greenblatt, undaunted, draws on other sources. He turns to Shakespeare’s work, searching it for clues to the man’s views on women, on family life, on politics and religion. He takes the biographical scraps we do have and places them in detailed historical context, pointing out where and when Shakespeare might have developed his creative genius. Most importantly, Greenblatt carefully maps his own path, distinguishing facts from speculation and labeling the evidence for each. His sourcing doesn’t clutter the story but instead adds to it, giving the reader a glimpse of historical sleuthwork.

Greenblatt can’t offer the reader certainty, and most of the time, neither can we. But he finds delight in the mysteries and satisfaction in illuminating new possibilities, and he shares both with his readers. We can, too.

Featured image: From the title page of the First Folio, by William Shakespeare, with copper engraving of the author by Martin Droeshout. Image courtesy of the Elizabethan Club and the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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Michelle Nijhuis’ award-winning reporting on science and the environment appears in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and many other publications. A longtime contributing editor of *High Country News*,... [MORE »](#)

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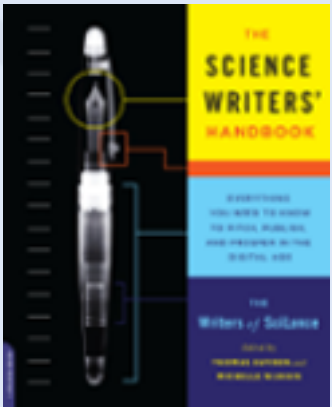
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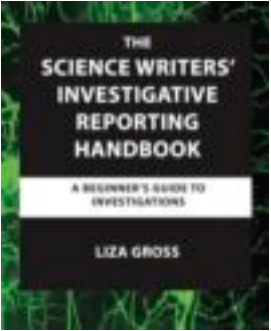
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