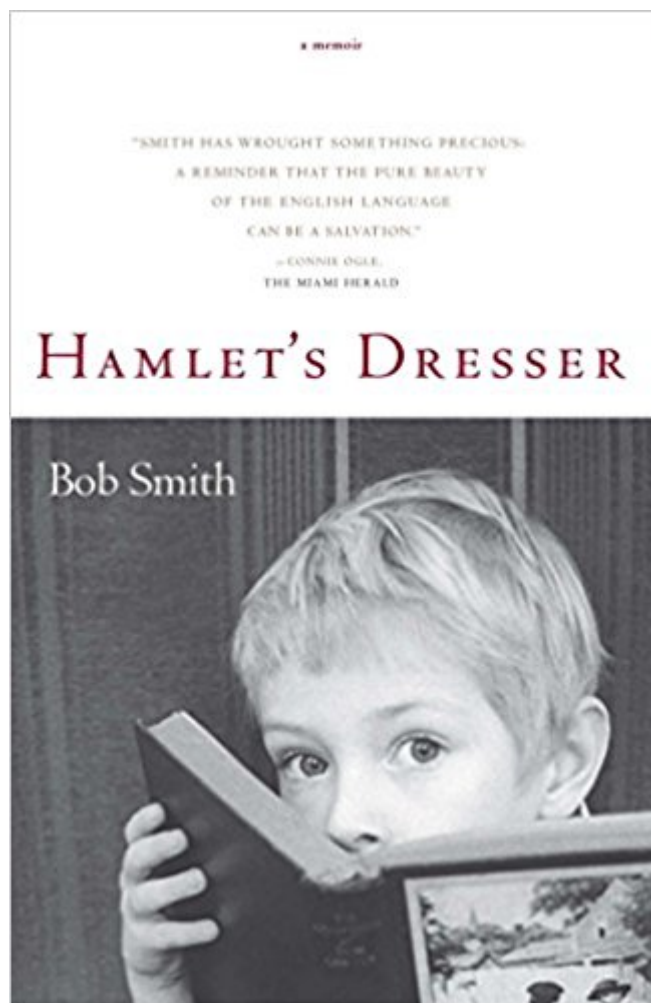


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# Hamlet's Dresser: A Memoir



## Synopsis

The true story of a boy whose life was saved by literature, *Hamlet's Dresser* is a portrait of a person made whole by art. Bob Smith's childhood was a fragile and lonely one, spent largely caring for his handicapped sister, Carolyn. But at age ten, his local librarian gave him a copy of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and it transformed him. In Bob's first look at Shakespeare's penetrating language -- "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" -- he had found a window through which to view the world. Years later, when the American Shakespeare Festival moved into Stratford and Smith was hired as Hamlet's dresser, his life's passion took shape. Blending tragedy and comedy, Smith gracefully weaves together his childhood memories with his experiences backstage and teaching the plays. The result is a gorgeous, tender, infectious book about the restorative powers of literature and art.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Of what do we write when we write of love? In Bob Smith's case, it is Shakespeare's poems and plays. *Hamlet's Dresser* braids two strands of his life into a modest, heartbreaking, and soaringly affirmative memoir. A bookish, lonely child, his crush on the Bard's work became love when, as an alienated teenager, he joined the American Shakespeare Theatre as Hamlet's dresser. In time he would dress other characters, perform in small roles, become a coach and a watcher, and eventually lead senior citizens' groups in Shakespeare-appreciation courses. But this ecstatic marriage was haunted by his sad, contorted childhood: an increasingly dysfunctional mother, a

distant father, and Caroline, his profoundly retarded sister. "Art," he writes, "can be a brutal thing, not just some decoration placed over the truth, but the truth itself." Smith's prose is bluntly ineffable: a rundown theatre looks like "Miss Havisham's bride cake" and the first teacher who didn't like him was "Miss Shumaker. It was right after I stopped pleasing everybody." The book is thick with short passages from Shakespeare. Placed in perfect context, they leap from the pages, abrupt as panoramic pop-ups. --H. O'Billovich --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this intimate, inspiring account, Smith concludes that words and ideas possess the ability to heal and transform a life no matter how dire and painful the circumstances, using his own difficult childhood and productive adulthood as proof. Here, the literary balm is the work of Shakespeare. The book opens with the death of one of the members of a group of seniors who gathered regularly in Manhattan to read the Bard's plays with Smith as their leader. Smith immediately shows his literary skill as he captures the humanity of his students. That sensitivity serves him well when he writes of his dysfunctional family (a traumatized mother, a distracted father and a disabled sister), revealing their shortcomings with clarity while seeking to understand his place in their lives and in the world. Smith adroitly assumes the role of observer and chronicler during his wry recollections of his topsy-turvy youth, while also examining how families can harm children emotionally with well-intended half-truths and neglect, as relatives make him feel he's somehow responsible for his sister's handicaps. Some of the most painful passages come during the unraveling of his mother's health while his father is at war, burdening young Smith further in caring for his increasingly troubled sister. Whether Smith is describing his alcoholic aunt, his spiteful grandmother or his aging students, his ability to juggle humor and pain never fails. Throughout this triumphant book, the shadow of Shakespeare looms, and Smith finds meaning in the plays to redeem his daily existence, eventually becoming Hamlet's dresser at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, where he delights in the workings of theater and meeting Katharine Hepburn, Jessica Tandy and others. Veteran memoir readers will find this book absorbing, refreshing and touching. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Not only is the story fascinating, but this book is beautifully written, truly a piece of literature. Bob Smith keeps the reader's attention by interspersing his words with Shakespeare's and by providing flashbacks that give the reader an appreciation and understanding of what "the Shakespeare" means and has meant to so many people. If you believe that there is a heavenly plan for all of us,

then you will come to see that, while his personal family life was sad, Bob has found solace in Shakespeare and a purpose in sharing it. Having attended many of Mr. Smith's Shakespeare readings, I don't know anyone who can tell me that they do not like Shakespeare after having Bob read and explain it. If you enjoy memoir as a genre or truly appreciate a well-written book, this is a must-read.

First rate. Must read for anyone in theater!

Beautifully written unforgettable memoir. Brilliant, touching, funny, haunting. A rare and treasured work.

A difficult life beautifully written by a talented caring person. There are no easy paths and the gift of sharing creativity very healing.

Love this book. I give it to all my graduating theater students to inspire them to keep theater as a part to their lives.

I have listened to Bob Smith read this book several times. It is delightful, true and entertaining! I highly recommend this audiobook to all!

Yesterday, I finished *Hamlet's Dresser: A Memoir*, written by Bob Smith who was a dresser/aide for Shakespearean actors including Katherine Hepburn among others. At some point, he started reading Shakespeare to senior citizens, getting them to appreciate the beauty and complexity of Shakespeare. I picked it up at McKay's in Chattanooga because of the connection to Shakespeare. Since writing a high school essay on some of the sonnets, I have come to love Shakespeare even if at times figuring out what Shakespeare was getting at is stubbornly impossible. There is a lot of Shakespeare mostly from the plays skillfully woven into the narrative. *Hamlet's Dresser* is also a sad story in a way because of Smith's relationship with his parents, and others that made his life so much different than the normal kid in school. His sister, Carolyn was profound mental retardation and moderate to significant physical disabilities due to complications at birth that were attributed to cerebral palsy. Her parents did not know how to cope, and a substantial portion of the burden, and blame, was cast on Smith. Carolyn's story is a reminder of how far we have come from the early 1940's in terms of working with the severely disabled though a lot remains to be

done. So much was not known and the stigma of "not being right" kept those who needed help from being able to get it. Carolyn's story is more than therapy and training; it is about giving the severely disabled a chance at a life that also allows for their loved ones to live as well. The narrative drew me in and I am glad I read *Hamlet's Dresser*. That being said, the flow was given to chunkiness, halting and hesitation. It led to stop and starting and re-reading. Then, there were the times that the time periods were so enmeshed that it was confusing. To this reader, it was like being in a dream, slipping from one time period into another and then out to the next without any defining break.

*Hamlet's Dresser* by Bob Smith 'Zoe died.' Just those two simple words. And from there on you are hooked. The sentence is up there with 'Jesus wept' as one you are not going to forget in a long while. Maybe more so since at least we know who Jesus is. Who's Zoe? How did she die? Why begin a book with what would appear to be The End - and which certainly was for Zoe? These are the opening two words from Bob Smith's memoirs *Hamlet's Dresser*. Born in 1941 in New England into what would now be called a dysfunctional family - and aren't all families dysfunctional in different ways and to differing degrees - he was christened Robert, called Bobby as a child, a name he hated, and had to wait until he was an adult before he finished with plain 'Bob'. In 1944 his sister Carolyn was born and it is she who, together with Shakespeare, is at the centre of this book. Which coupling is fitting for, as Bob Smith points out, Shakespeare is full of ghosts and memory. Carolyn is also the person to whom the book is dedicated: For Carolyn Wells Smith. Carolyn was born severely retarded. As she grew she had the body of a 21 year old woman, but the mind of a two-year old child - a child who was not potty trained. Bobby was drafted in to help. 'Wipe her good Bobby!' was a phrase which stayed in his head all his life. As their mother retreated more and more to a sick bed and a pathological obsession with cleaning everything in the house, sometimes several times a day, Bobby was drafted in to help here too. 'When I was four, my father joined the army - "to be a man," my mother said. She thought he'd abandoned her, and for a while he probably did. He went away because everybody cried all the time.' For a short time the family followed him to Florida, where he was taking basic training, staying with relatives. It was here that a small miracle happened: 'Carolyn looked up at me. I was by her crib making faces. Suddenly she stopped crying and just looked at me for a long, long time. I was amazed and a little afraid. I never saw her look at anyone, she never did! She was looking at me. And not crying! Then it happened .... My sister smiled at me.' Thrown out of the house soon after because the relatives could not take the crying either, the husband handed over a bag of oranges. 'A few days before he'd asked my mother when she would be taking the baboon out of his house? Over a lifetime she's repeated the cruel words a thousand times and

always as if they'd been said only last week.' After eighteen years of intensive and wearing family care - by this damaged but somehow heroic family - their parents decide Carolyn must go into a permanent home to be looked after. Six weeks later Bobby goes to visit her. `Inside I asked a friendly nurse for directions. As I went up the iron stairs and down the long white hall I could hear my sister. She was saying my name over and over. She knew very few words - car, go to bed, Bobby. Even now in my old red house by the river all these years later I can hear her voice, her young lost voice, singsong - "Bobby ... Bobby ... Bobby." Carolyn is one thread of this story. There are others. One is the growing up of a very bright, very gifted, very lonely boy who one day decides he will no longer conform to a school regime of testing to see that what has been `taught' has also been `learned'. He begins to follow his own solitary path taking off early on Saturdays to visit the Museum of Modern Art on 5th Avenue. There is also the influence of his relatives and in particular his maternal grandmother Nana. But the most important influence is Shakespeare. It starts when he is in fifth grade, not yet into his teens. He does his homework every day at a beautifully furnished little gray stone local library. One day he gets soaked in a downpour and the librarian makes him take off his shoes and socks to dry them and she then gives him some rough paper towels to soak up the worst of the rain. While engaged in this task he notices a little stained glass portrait in the window. `It's the image of a bald fat man with a silly pointed beard and a cocky amamy moustache that curves up goofy at the corners.' Who is it he asks. By answer, when he's dry enough to sit at table and start his arithmetic homework the librarian puts a little book at his elbow. `Stamped in gold on the dark blue cover was the same pudgy face as the window. Along the side in bright gold letters, "William Shakespeare The Merchant of Venice." I opened it. Antonio. "In sooth I know not why I am so sad." I read it again. Ten simple monosyllabic words and of course I couldn't know what sooth meant, but it's hardly necessary ... I think that the more confused you are inside, the more you need to trust a thing outside of yourself. I was desperate to lean against something bigger than me and it was clear that William Shakespeare understood what it's like to ache and not know why... Poetry became a beautiful place to hide from my life and from my parents, a place I knew they would never follow me to.' That first oblique introduction by a sensitive empathetic librarian was to spark a lifelong passion, one that was to lead on to a job at sixteen as Hamlet's Dresser at the American Shakespeare Festival at Stratford USA; to meeting such luminaries as Katharine Hepburn, Bert Lahr (the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz), Jessica Tandy, Jimmy Cagney and others; to becoming an actor himself for a short spell - long enough, however, to know that acting was not for him but that directing was, so that there is a list of more than a dozen groups, companies and festivals where he has directed Shakespeare plays; and, finally, and memorably, to teach Shakespeare to actors,

guilds and adult life-long learning classes, where Zoe and lots of other old-timers make an appearance. All these threads are woven together, chapter after chapter, in a quite extraordinary way, interspersed with and moved along by short extracts - sometimes no more than a phrase - from the Bard's plays and sonnets. The first part of this review may have made Hamlet's Dresser sound like the latest in a long line of what have been dubbed 'misery memoirs'. Nothing could be further from the truth. The book is an enormously uplifting experience, an emotional roller-coaster, by turns heart-wrenching, absorbing, engaging, exhilarating but always life-affirming. Most readers will have had the not uncommon experience of wanting a book never to end but for me this is the first time on completing a book that I have ever turned straight back to the beginning to start the whole experience again. Immediately. A warning. One line from Shakespeare I do remember from Form 5 at Roundhay School. 'If you have tears prepare to shed them now.' Julius Caesar. DF

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