

**DAMNED TO FAME: The Life of Samuel Beckett**  
**By James Knowlson**

Twenty-five years ago when James Knowlson informed Samuel Beckett that he had been commissioned to write a biography of him, the self-effacing author courteously but clearly indicated that he would be less than pleased to make the details of his private life available for public scrutiny. Knowlson backed off for two decades and continued to study his subject from afar, writing or editing 10 books on Beckett.

In the interim, an unauthorized biography (by Deirdre Bair) was published, a project some critics believed she was not up to. Though he takes pains to avoid being critical of Bair, Knowlson obviously was not impressed by her effort. In 1989, he again approached the now-ailing author for his unambiguous consent. Beckett replied in eight words: "For biography of me by you it's yes."

Six months later Beckett was dead, but not before he had been extensively interviewed by Knowlson. For the first time Beckett confirmed the veracity of many of the actual events that turn up in his writings as recondite transformed fictions. These late harvest gleanings are responsible for much of the maturity of tone that pervades this 800-page study. And Knowlson's crisp and unobtrusive writing makes it easier to get through than one might imagine.

Beckett's belated agreement to cooperate was no mere change of mind from a man who had habitually disdained all interest in him from the world at large. This was, after all, the man who, upon learning that he had won the Nobel Prize for literature, holed up in, of all places, Tunisia until the media frenzy had abated and subsequently sent his publisher to Stockholm to accept the award.

Anyone acquainted with Beckett's habits will understand that Knowlson was hardly alone in having been initially turned down. Through the years many petitioners for an audience, including this reviewer, were rebuffed.

In 1982, when the late Art Seidenbaum asked me to interview Beckett for these pages, I wrote to the author in Paris requesting permission to submit a list of written questions concerning his work, permission that Beckett granted by return mail. My ensuing queries earned an equally prompt response that was at once apologetic and firm: "I have no answers to such questions. I am

sorry to disappoint you.”

The point here is not so much to spotlight Beckett’s fabled guardedness with regard to his artistic intentions but to suggest that the apparent inaccessibility of his published work was emblematic of the way in which he led his life.

Beckett’s willingness to help having been secured, Knowlson sure-footedly tracks the relationship between experience and art and ends up with some provocative conclusions. For example, he sees Beckett’s trilogy—“Molloy,” “Malone Dies” and “The Unnamable”—not as the generally received philosophical maunderings of a man alone in a room passively revisiting his past but as “the most deeply personal books he ever wrote.”

Knowlson evaluates these fictional narratives, which, along with “Waiting for Godot” secured Beckett’s reputation, as a brave attempt by the author to go into himself on the deepest level and deal “with the fragmentation he discovered in the self.”

Knowlson’s analyses are certain and deft, without the kind of critical bludgeoning often resorted to by uncertain interpreters. He is especially good on “Godot,” noting that the play is rooted in Beckett’s French Resistance activities during World War II (and courteous in crediting the earliest critical source for this theory, Hugh Kenner).

The biographer makes no secret of his respect and affection for Beckett, finding him as formidable in personal encounter as on the printed page. Beckett admirers will find it easy to empathize with Knowlson’s feelings, so many of us having been awed by what may be best described as the nuclear force of his words.

Relentlessly exploring through the barest of language what it means to be human on the most elemental of levels, Beckett ruthlessly empties his compositions of all that is extraneous. The compressed remainder is then harnessed to explode the reader’s mind with the universal truths he so persistently (and for some so depressingly) pursued. Knowlson tells us that Beckett deemed music and painting to be art forms superior to language and thoroughly documents Beckett’s lifelong involvement with both.

He is also not loath to discuss the man’s frailties, among them a predilection for heavy drinking. During a long union with Suzanne Deschevaux Dusmenil, the French woman who championed his work early on and who interposed herself between a diffident

husband and the literary establishment, he had several affairs with other women that seemed to be less about love, or even sex, than about a necessary release from tension. It is a measure of the man that the women tended to remain friends long after the affairs had run their courses.

A crucial relationship for Beckett was the difficult one with his mother, whose strong-mindedness drove him from Ireland in his 20s but whom he never really left. "I am what her savage loving has made me," he wrote to a friend at the time.

In Paris, Beckett fell under the influence of James Joyce and editorially assisted the older writer, who by then was almost blind. Knowlson observes that even at this formative stage of his literary career, Beckett's philosophic underpinnings led him to disagree with Joyce, who believed that the key to artistic expression lay primarily in the rearrangement of words. Beckett, on the other hand, intuited early on that "whatever is said is so far from the experience" and that for him it was a matter of "getting down below the surface to the authentic weakness of being."

One of the many fine things about this book is its evocative title. Not surprisingly, the telling words issued from Beckett. Knowlson came across the phrase "damned to fame" in one of the author's notebooks and knew enough to employ it, just as his subject had taken his own cue from Alexander Pope—himself no slouch at depicting the ridiculousness of the human condition.

We read about the lives of others to monitor, if not indeed validate, how we ourselves live. By working through this model of biographical excellence you will better understand Beckett and perhaps yourself.

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