

Wear and Tear: The Threads of My Life by Tracy Tynan – review

[Kate Kellaway](#) • Tuesday 7 March 2017 07.30 GMT



‘Clothes dress up a stark narrative’: the author with her father, the *Observer*’s former theatre critic, in the 1950s.

It takes a chapter or two to cotton on to *Wear and Tear*. Tracy Tynan is the daughter of Kenneth Tynan, the *Observer*’s famous theatre critic, and Elaine Dundy, author of the best-selling novel *The Dud Avocado* (1958), based on Dundy’s adventures as a young American in Paris. However dud the avocado, Kenneth and Elaine were – as parents – worse. They were beyond rotten. But Tracy Tynan – born in London, in 1952 – does not appear to be on a vengeful mission. Neither parent is still alive – Kenneth died of emphysema in 1980, Elaine of a heart attack in 2008 – and she is performing what comes across as a necessary act: telling the shocking story her way, starting with a child’s-eye view of events, as she has every right to do.

Many of the seedier details about Kenneth Tynan are already known. His second wife, Kathleen Tynan, wrote a biography, *The Life of Kenneth*

Tynan (1987), about which she remarked that she felt a “passionate sleuth, torn between being the outsider and insider”. She also edited his letters (1994). Then followed [the diaries \(2001\)](#), edited by John Lahr, and the rebarbative [one-man show, *Tynan*](#), by Richard Nelson for the RSC (2004), in which Corin Redgrave – physically an unlikely choice for the part – uncannily translated himself into the dressy critic. As a writer, too, Tynan was a brilliant and incisive dandy. His middle name was Peacock. He had a penchant for sadomasochism, a dependency on alcohol and, in that show, I remember Redgrave wore horribly lively socks selected by Tracy – who was in charge of threads on the production. A taste for scandal was another of Kenneth’s features – he had the dubious distinction of being the first person to say “fuck” on the BBC.

The reason it is not at first clear whether this book will hang together is that Tracy elects to tell her story through individual articles of clothing. Clothes have been her life – she has been a costume designer on many films and in 2010 won a costume design award from the Women’s International Film and Television Showcase. Nonetheless, one fears the pegging will prove a contrivance and I predicted that I’d lose patience rifling through what appeared to be a built-in cupboard of a memoir. But I could not have been more wrong. It was not long before I was transfixed, unable to do anything other than read on.

Tracy writes calmly and tends to be non-judgmental – one critic in the family was perhaps enough. But this is, nonetheless, a “yell and tell” memoir. It seems fitting that Kenneth was fond of bullfighting, given the ferocity of the rows between him and Elaine. On one occasion, she ran naked into Tracy’s bedroom screaming: “Your father is trying to kill me.” Tracy, aged seven or eight, was sheltering under her mother’s sealskin coat (which gives the chapter its name). Tracy recalls her naivety in a way that makes the episode even more painful: “I wondered if I ought to get up and give her the coat. Why had she been naked?” A tremendous amount of crockery was smashed in her parents’ marriage.

When Tracy describes what it was like growing up in the family house in Mayfair, she remembers birthdays spent with au pair girls. Kenneth and Elaine had more important places to be – their pursuit of celebrities a particularly abject compulsion. Little Tracy would greet their starry visitors – including Laurence Olivier, Marlene Dietrich, Orson Welles – with what writer and journalist Sally Belfrage later remembered as “perfect manners”. Her mother’s whim was that Tracy should curtsy to guests. She describes curtsying to John Osborne – looking back now in something more bewildered than anger – with no idea who he was.

As I read on, I started to appreciate the important and poignant purpose that clothes serve here. They dress up a stark narrative: if the ostensible focus of a chapter is on a pair of coveted apple-green shoes, this is less painful than an unmediated consideration of her parents. The clothes are steadying. And yet what I think of as the Philip Larkin question soon surfaces. How does it profit us to know that a writer we admire is an unsatisfactory human being? Why should it be of interest that Kenneth and Elaine were neglectful drunks? Do we need to know the grim details of Kenneth’s sadomasochistic relationships?

One defence might be Kenneth’s own: he did not believe in self-censoring. Tracy tells us that a therapist, after reading his diaries, said they gave the most “comprehensive, clarifying and moving” account of sadomasochism he had come across. Another argument might be that this is a rounded portrait: Tracy loved her father and balances her narrative by describing the compassion in him – even if it seems seldom to have been directed her way.

But the most important answer is that one’s greatest interest in reading the book is Tracy herself. How has she survived as well as she has? This is the question that drives one on – agog. When her mother is admitted to psychiatric hospital, her main feeling is relief – a clue to how bad things have become. And yet she makes a life for herself. She marries Jim

McBride, an amiable film director, with a son, Jesse, from a previous marriage. She gives a wonderful account of their shambolic midnight wedding in Las Vegas. She describes the arrival of her own son, Matthew, and devotes a moving chapter, The Pink Knitted Cap, to their daughter Ruby. The cap was a gift from a mother on the neonatal ward where Ruby, born prematurely, showed that she shares her mother's talent for survival. Ruby is now 26, with a master's degree in library and information science.

The book is about wear and tear and flair – for Tracy's opinions about clothes are as distinctive as her father's. There is a telling photograph of Kenneth on the book's cover typing, absorbed, in tiger-print trousers. Tracy, a toddler, sits at his feet – ignored – wearing a smocked frock. It is easy to understand how her lifelong affection for camouflage developed. But this is a book that aims to throw off disguises and it reveals a poised, resilient and sympathetic woman. It is only at the end that her narrative falters. In the tone of a conscientious schoolgirl completing an essay, she writes: "I expect that I will always be opinionated about clothing, and I hope, as I grow older, that I shall continue to be curious and discover new stories to tell." This, if not quite a curtsy, is a slightly uncomfortable bow – her curtain call.

- *Wear and Tear* by Tracy Tynan is published by Duckworth (£18.99). To order a copy for £16.14 go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99