

NONFICTION REVIEW

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

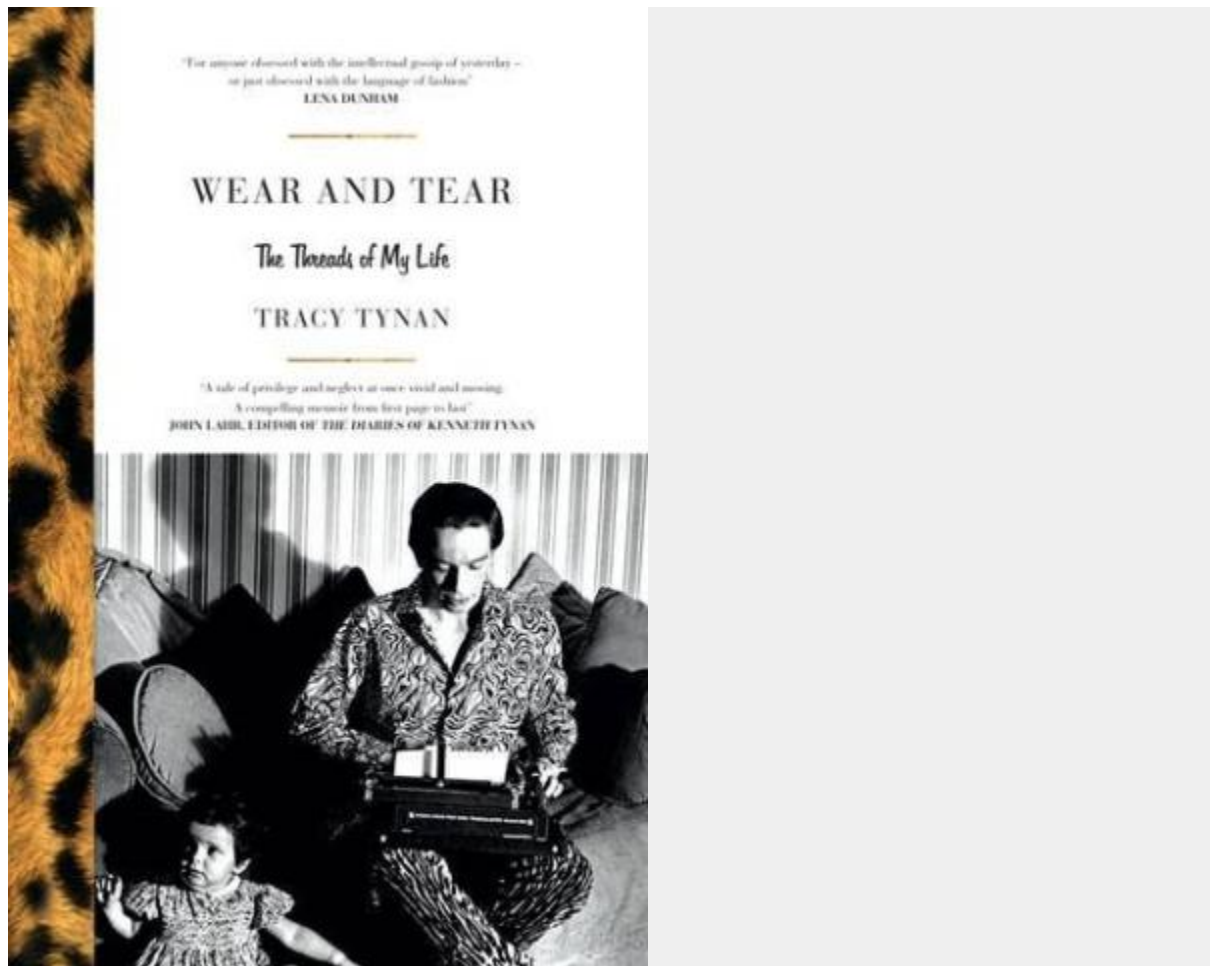
It wasn't easy growing up as the daughter of Kenneth Tynan, learns
Dominic Maxwell

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Kenneth Tynan at work, with Tracy at his feet NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY LONDON
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On the cover of this thoroughly readable, quasi-celebrity memoir is a picture of its author as a baby, sitting at the feet of her garishly dressed father. It's a sign of what's to come for young Tracy Tynan, daughter of Kenneth Tynan (1927-80), the most dashingly brilliant theatre critic of the postwar period. The great man sits on his sofa, fag in hand, bashing out some copy on his typewriter as if his daughter were not there. By page 3 of the book we discover that Tracy's mother, the writer Elaine Dundy, had a pair of faux leopard-skin trousers that matched her husband's.

Tynan and Dundy could also match each other for flamboyance, for sexual appetite, for devotion to the literary high life. The way Tracy tells it, their marriage was a typhoon of glamour, sex and neglect. She was the Saffy character from *Absolutely Fabulous*, both parents were Edina. From an early age she sought refuge in fashion. She eventually moved to Los Angeles and became a costume designer.

The daughter comes across as level-headed about her material privilege and her emotional privations, but she knows the juicy bits here concern mum and dad. Watching them row was "like watching a horror movie, scary but riveting". Her father hailed from Birmingham, but spat out provincialism as if it were an olive stone, courting showbiz friends at the family's mansion flat in Mayfair. Dundy came from a wealthy New York Jewish family; her grandfather, Heyman Rosenberg, had made a fortune by inventing the self-tapping screw. Famous friends flock from both sides of the family ("Orson", "Marlene"). When young Tracy goes to buy a cat, it is the photographer Richard Avedon who drives her to get it. On holiday

in Cannes with her maternal grandmother, she ends up waterskiing on Roman Polanski's shoulders.

Her father is defined mostly by his absence, occasionally by his luridness or impatience. Her mother is a more vivid figure. She has lovers over, helps Tracy to pass her exams to St Paul's Girls' School by hypnotising her. It works. Or, at least, Tracy gets in. When she is ten, her parents opt for an open marriage. "They deemed this the only solution to their compulsive infidelity."

This doesn't stop "epic fights" as they try to be "the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald of the Fifties". So when Tracy's teacher suggests that she might be better off at a boarding school, she welcomes the stability. Her vocabulary impresses the admissions board at the coeducational progressive school Dartington Hall. She puts that down to "the inordinate amount of time I spent with clever adults, fighting or exchanging witticisms".

In 1965 her father becomes the first man to use the f-word live on British television. As she heads into her teens people at school assume she is some sort of beacon of sexual liberation. Far from it; she details awkward early dating mishaps, and her vaginismus, which she suspects can be linked to the sexual undertones to her parents' battles. "Unconsciously, I think, I had absorbed a fear of sex that probably caused my physical tightness."



Tynan and his wife Elaine Dundy: watching them row was "like watching a horror movie" ALAMY

Moving to New York, her mother adds pills to booze. Living in the same apartment block as Tennessee Williams, Dundy and the playwright phone each other to compare their drug choices. Then she admits herself to a chichi psychiatric hospital — where, at first, Tracy is most taken with the idea of meeting one of her mother's fellow inmates, the pop star James Taylor.

He's not there by the time she gets there, but then Tracy is used to people not being there for her. When she turns 21, and studying social anthropology at the University of Sussex, her

father offers her two birthday treats so awful-sounding you can't help but laugh. He organises a special screening of the porn film *Deep Throat*. It proves the longest 90 minutes of her life. Then he throws her a party at the Young Vic theatre, where the emphasis is very much on celebrity guests (Peter Sellers, Liza Minnelli, Lauren Bacall, Maggie Smith, plus cabaret turns by Max Wall, John Wells and Dudley Moore) rather than Tracy. They bond, briefly, as she introduces him to cocaine.

Money softens Tracy's path in life, but it rarely sounds like an easy one. When she moves to Los Angeles, her father moves there too with his second wife, Kathleen Halton ("a trophy wife, but with brains"). His sexual adventuring continues, but his health declines. When he is on his deathbed in 1980, Tracy, 28, tells him that she loves him. He ripostes with what amounts to a two-star review for her attempt at intimacy: "This is starting to sound like a bad hospital movie."

Tracy bonds with her father, briefly, when she introduces him to cocaine

Albert Finney, Tom Stoppard and Princess Margaret are among the mourners at his London memorial. Tracy imagines the eulogy she never gave: "I loved you, Dad, but you were more like a friend than a father. You were too wrapped up in your own dramas to see who I really was, but I'll miss you." And if we don't really get to know this spectacularly gifted, but trying man, well, neither did the author. "Ultimately I think my father remained a mystery even to those who knew him well."

She doesn't address her difficult adult relationship with her mother till near the end of this book, when she hears the news of her death while driving to a meditation retreat. She talks to her mother's mourning friends (Gore Vidal, Jilly Cooper, Gloria Vanderbilt) and wonders about the woman they liked so much and she could not bear to be with. You would like to know more, but the last third of the book touches mostly on marriage, career, parenthood.

You couldn't say it's dull — she works with Richard Gere (nice), Kris Kristofferson (a macho pain), Geneviève Bujold (first tricky, then a friend for life); she gets married to the film director Jim McBride; their daughter is born three months premature; her half-sister marries her stepson. Little she mentions here is vanilla. Yet while Tracy makes clothing the motif of the book — each of the 36 chapters is named after an item that appears in it — you can't help but want her to weave more of her parents into the last third of her story. It ends up bitty as a result, but even so it's vivid and entertaining throughout.

***Wear and Tear: The Threads of My Life* by Tracy Tynan, Duckworth Overlook, 320pp, £18.99**