

Truckload of Art: The Life and Work of Terry Allen

Brendan Greaves. Hachette, \$34 (576p) ISBN 978-0-306-92454-5

In this rollicking debut biography, Greaves, founder and owner of the record label Paradise of Bachelors, traces the knock-about life of artist, playwright, and country singer Terry Allen from his Lubbock, Tex., boyhood to international success. Among key episodes, Greaves recaps Allen's tempestuous childhood with his dad, Sled, a professional baseball player turned showbiz promoter, and mom Pauline, a honky-tonk pianist and alcoholic; his early-1960s escape to California and rise as a multimedia artist (one of his installations featured rotting pig's hearts in an aquarium); his career as an alt-country pioneer; and his marriage to his high school sweetheart, actress and playwright Jo Harvey Allen. Greaves's loose-jointed narrative is a thrilling whirl of recording sessions, theater rehearsals, marital spats and makeups, and off-the-wall encounters with Elvis, the Manson Family, and others. The Allen that emerges is high-spirited, sometimes mournful, often jangling with tension, and uncompromising in his artistic vision. Scrupulous detail and raucous picaresque merge with evocative discussions of the artist's work (of an 1974 installation, Greaves observes, "The center panel, *Gonorrhea Madonna*, was built around a large, hand-tinted photo of a young girl, her awkward stance and deer-in-the-headlights expression... offset by a coy grin and adult evening wear. This provocative image... is in fact eleven-year-old Terry himself, in drag"). It adds up to a fascinating portrait of an American original. Meg Thompson, Thompson Literary. (Mar.)

