

LOVING TALLULAH BANKHEAD

Written by Carrie Chappell

Illustrations by Lauren Patterson

Published by Paris Heretics

Purchase here: <https://www.carriechappell.com/order-my-books/loving-tallulah-bankhead>

Reviewed by Rachel Nix

Shortly after reading *Loving Tallulah Bankhead*, I recall telling Carrie Chappell that this book felt like an event. It felt like an invitation I wish I'd received 25 years ago. I meant it and I thanked her for it. I suspect you will, too.

I grew up about an hour and a half north of Chappell in a town that couldn't be more rural and cut off from liberal persuasion. As a kid and even as a teen, internet was the future I hadn't seen yet. I sure hadn't found Tallulah Bankhead, born and raised not too far from me, but gone before even my parents were old enough to write their own names. I didn't have any progressive icons or queer idols. This little town I still live in pretended none of that existed.

But there she was: Tallulah. She was waiting for us, all of us, this whole time. Chappell found her. Or maybe Tallulah found Chappell. Either way, in this collection they're up to no good and it's glorious.

Tallulah, I don't want / To keep you, I want to conspire.

Chappell conjures Tallulah with precision. The drawl, as husky as it is devastating, is audible in the lines. Though the real Tallulah likely never uttered any of this, we're none the wiser. This is a testament to both Chappell's craft and devotion: she can alternate between her own voice and Tallulah's cleanly and with care. That's not to say there's anything careful about this collection. The poems kick at and stomp on the history that's kicked and stomped on our kind, exposing the cruelties and unearned judgments following southern women from birth to burial. Chappell and Tallulah are done with conforming, opting instead to burn skirts and bury old ideas. They own themselves and free the rest of us. We watch the unraveling of it all; the big show: our autonomy being granted by the woman America tried to undo a lifetime ago.

“Tallulah, you are my sure-fire fantasy,
Scandal up and down, a woman hardly
Known but famous for cartwheeling
Through her own pity parties, for
Swindling in her minions late night
To hold her hand through her own

Dark water terrors. And were they
Convenient but not true? Like all things
In America we needed someone to burn,
So we nailed you down, bled you of your
Humanity to punish ourselves.”

In allowing us to follow along with their jaunts, Chappell shows us who Tallulah was: a woman Alabama could have eaten up and spit out were it not for her own prowess. Was she broken? Yes. Did Tallulah use her sharp edges to cut her way out of confinement? Again and again. She did it with flair and for no one but herself. This is where we find Chappell, too: escaping the confines of the conservative South for Paris, France. We see the arrival of a woman baptized by Tallulah’s theatrics.

Chappell maneuvers through her own vulnerabilities honestly while clinging to grit and self-proclaimed dodginess. Her writing lends its attention to every hideout of the human heart: where there’s humor, there’s sensuality; where there’s hurt, there’s healing. Anger and joy find their moments, too.

I don’t think anyone would define Tallulah Bankhead as a proper role model, but that’s ultimately what Chappell gets at in this collection: there should have never been a model to imitate and those expectations shouldn’t have existed. It took Tallulah’s disdain for order to unveil reality. The back-then generations tried to destroy her for her charm and audacity. The back-then generations are still here and up to the same tricks, but we’ve learned from the best how to shut them up.

*Tal-lu-lah, Tal-lu-lah, Tal-lu-lah. I never wanted you martyr,
But I have held your name in the slag of my heart and dreamed you saint.*

Loving Tallulah Bankhead is a book to be owned and passed around. It’s one to be talked about and displayed for the art of it. Paris Heretics has become my new favorite press and you’ll see why when you peruse their books, particularly this one. The care and precision delivered in these pages, along with the beautifully apt art provided by Lauren Patterson, honors not only the poetry, but all of us wanting a different way forward.