SOFTWARE & TECH

# Collected Stories By Donald Margulies

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## Exploring the Emotional Depth of Collected Stories By Donald Margulies

Few plays capture the complex, often painful dance between mentorship, ambition, and artistic legacy as acutely as **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**. First performed in 1996, this two-character drama has become a mainstay of regional and college theatre, celebrated for its razor-sharp dialogue and deeply resonant themes. The play explores the relationship between Ruth Steiner, a revered and established short story writer, and Lisa Morrison, a bright, eager, and increasingly ambitious graduate student. Over the course of six scenes spanning six years, Margulies crafts an intimate portrait of two women bound by literature, admiration, and a secret that threatens to unravel everything. This article offers a comprehensive examination of the play, from its plot and characters to its themes, critical reception, and enduring relevance in the world of contemporary drama.

## Plot Overview: A Friendship Forged and Fractured

**Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**opens in Ruth Steiner's Greenwich Village apartment. Lisa Morrison, a young and enthusiastic student, arrives for her first meeting with her new mentor, the celebrated author Ruth Steiner. The initial conversation is filled with intellectual energy; Lisa is starstruck, while Ruth is initially guarded but gradually drawn to the younger woman's passion. Over the first act, we witness the developing friendship. Ruth shares her personal history, her struggles with writing, and the loneliness that often accompanies a life dedicated to art. Lisa becomes a devoted protégé, absorbing Ruth's wisdom and growing more confident in her own voice.

The second act jumps forward several years. Lisa has published her first collection of stories to modest but promising reviews. However, the central conflict emerges when Ruth discovers that Lisa's latest story, a soon-to-be-published piece in a prestigious magazine, draws heavily—almost identically—from a deeply personal story Ruth had confided in her years earlier. This revelation sets off a tense confrontation. Ruth feels betrayed, her trust and private history exploited. Lisa defends her work as fiction inspired by real life, arguing that a story, once told, no longer belongs solely to the speaker. The play culminates in a painful rift, leaving the audience to ponder the ethics of artistic borrowing, the nature of ownership in storytelling, and the cost of ambition.

## Character Analysis: The Mentor and the Protégé

### Ruth Steiner: The Titan with a Fragile Past

Ruth Stein is a composite of many real-life literary giants—intelligent, acerbic, deeply private, and fiercely protective of her legacy. She represents the old guard, a woman who has poured her life experiences into her fiction and guards them like precious artifacts. Margulies gives Ruth a rich backstory: a brief affair with a married poet, struggles with depression, and a lifelong commitment to her craft at the expense of romantic relationships. Through her character, **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**examines the isolation that can accompany creative success and the yearning for a legacy that outlasts the writer. Ruth's anger at Lisa is not

simply about plagiarism; it is about the dissolution of a rare intimacy. She gave Lisa her secrets, and Lisa turned them into commodity.

### Lisa Morrison: Ambition and Moral Fluidity

Lisa begins as a starry-eyed admirer, almost comically eager to please. Over the course of the play, she evolves into a confident, ambitious writer who believes she has a right to any story she can tell, even if it means borrowing from her mentor's life. Margulies does not paint Lisa as a villain; instead, he presents a complex portrait of a young woman navigating the treacherous waters of literary success. Her argument—that once a story is told, it enters the public domain of narrative—challenges Ruth's more possessive view of experience. Lisa's arc forces the audience to ask hard questions: At what point does homage become theft? Can a protégé honor a mentor while also surpassing her? The ethical dilemma she embodies makes **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies** a timeless piece for discussion.

## Major Themes in the Play

### Mentorship and the Transfer of Legacy

At its heart, **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**is a meditation on mentorship. The relationship between Ruth and Lisa mirrors the classic teacher-student dynamic: admiration, dependency, eventual rebellion, and a painful separation. Margulies explores how mentors both nourish and inadvertently stifle their protégés. Ruth wants Lisa to grow, but she also wants Lisa to respect boundaries that Lisa ultimately finds arbitrary. The play suggests that mentorship is an act of generosity fraught with vulnerability. The mentor gives away pieces of themselves, hoping the student will use them wisely, but with no guarantee of that outcome.

### Artistic Theft, Inspiration, and Ownership

The central ethical conflict of the play is the question: Who owns a story? When Ruth tells Lisa about her past affair, she does so in confidence, as a friend, not as a source. Lisa's decision to transform that confidence into fiction breaks an unspoken contract. Yet Margulies complicates the issue by making Lisa's story a good one—artistically valid. The play does not provide a clear answer; instead, it forces the audience to weigh loyalty against artistic freedom. This ambiguity is one of the reasons **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies** continues to provoke lively debate among theatregoers and students alike.

### Aging, Relevance, and the Fear of Being Forgotten

Ruth is acutely aware that her best work may be behind her. She watches Lisa's rise with a mixture of pride and envy. The play subtly addresses the fear of obsolescence that haunts many creative artists. As the younger generation draws from the well of older experiences, the older generation risks being reduced to source material rather than active creators. Ruth's eventual isolation—she ends the play alone, her former protégé estranged—underscores the melancholy truth that literary fame is often fleeting and that relationships built on artistic admiration can be fragile.

## Structure and Dramatic Technique

Margulies employs a classic two-act structure with multiple scene changes, each representing a significant turning point in the relationship. The setting remains Ruth's apartment, grounding the story in an intimate, domestic space that mirrors the psychological closeness of the two characters. The dialogue is naturalistic yet charged with subtext, a hallmark of Margulies's writing. He uses silences and interruptions masterfully, allowing the audience to read between the lines. The title itself—**Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**—carries a double meaning: it refers to the physical book of stories that Lisa eventually publishes, but also to the way people collect, hoard, and ultimately share their personal narratives. The play's structure invites audiences to reflect on how stories are accumulated, reshaped, and handed down.

Critical Reception and Legacy

When **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**premiered at South Coast Repertory in 1996, it received strong reviews and later enjoyed successful runs off-Broadway. The New York Times described the play as "a piercing exploration of literary ethics" and praised Margulies for "creating two fully realized, flawed, and utterly human characters." The play became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and has been performed widely across the United States and internationally. It is frequently taught in playwriting and literature courses as a model of dramatic conflict and character development. Despite being over two decades old, its themes remain fresh, particularly in an era when issues of cultural appropriation, intellectual property, and the ethics of storytelling dominate public discourse.

## Notable Productions

Several key productions have shaped the play's reputation. The original off-Broadway production starred Maria Tucci as Ruth and Debra Messing as Lisa. In 2010, a Broadway revival brought the play to a new generation, starring Alan Alda and Sarah Paulson—though the play was originally written for two women, gender-bent productions have also been staged. Regional theatres from the Guthrie to the Goodman have mounted productions, each bringing fresh interpretations. The flexibility of the script—two actors, one set, powerful dialogue—makes **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**a favorite for intimate performance spaces. The play's ability to work with different casting choices (gender, race, age) underscores its universal themes.

## Compare and Contrast with Other Works

Margulies's play often finds itself in conversation with other works about artistic rivalry and mentorship, such as David Mamet's *Oleanna* or Yasmina Reza's *Art*. However, where those plays emphasize confrontation and intellectual combat, **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies** leans more on emotional nuance and quiet devastation. The play also echoes the themes of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, where literary obsession leads to moral compromise. For readers and theatregoers interested in the psychology of creativity, this play remains a definitive text.

## Relevance in Today's Cultural Landscape

In an age of social media oversharing, memoir scandals, and debates over who has the right to tell whose story, **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**feels more relevant than ever. Contemporary audiences are acutely aware of the fine line between inspiration and appropriation. The play asks: When a writer borrows from a friend's life, is it a violation or the natural process of art? In a world where personal stories are often monetized and viral, the ethical questions raised by Margulies resonate beyond the literary world into the realms of journalism, podcasting, and even content creation. The play also speaks to the dynamics of generational transfer—how younger artists often feel entitled to repurpose the experiences of those who came before them, and how the older generation must grapple with losing control of their narrative.

## How to Approach Teaching the Play

For educators and theatre lovers, **Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**offers rich material for discussion. Key topics include:

- Character motivation – Why does Lisa feel justified in her actions? Why is Ruth so devastated?
- Ethical ambiguity – Is there a clear right or wrong in this scenario? The play avoids easy answers.
- Literary allusion – The play references real authors and works, grounding it in a specific literary tradition.
- Gender dynamics – Both characters are women, but the play's conflicts transcend gender; productions with men have also succeeded.

Study guides often pair the play with excerpts from works by Alice Munro, Grace Paley, or other short
Collected Stories By Donald Margulies text of
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Collected Stories By Donald Margulies is widely available in print and digital formats, making it accessible for classroom use.

## Conclusion: A Lasting Contribution to American Drama

**Collected Stories By Donald Margulies**endures because it does not preach. It presents two compelling perspectives on a deeply uncomfortable situation and trusts the audience to wrestle with its implications. The play is a masterclass in dramatic economy—two characters, one set, and a story that feels both intimate and universal. It speaks to anyone who has ever had a mentor, felt the sting of betrayal, or struggled with the ethics of turning life into art. For its emotional precision, intellectual honesty, and lasting relevance, this play remains one of the most important works of late twentieth-century American theatre. Whether you are encountering it as a student, a director, or an audience member, the questions it raises will linger long after the final curtain.

For further exploration, consider reading the published script from Dramatists Play Service or viewing a recorded production available through educational streaming platforms. The play continues to inspire new generations to think carefully about the stories we collect, the ones we tell, and the ones we perhaps ought to keep to ourselves.

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